

*The Adventures
of an Ensign*

by Vedette

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The Adventures of an Ensign

TO
MY WIFE.

The Adventures of an Ensign

BY

VEDETTE

SECOND IMPRESSION

William Blackwood and Sons
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1917



The Adventures of an Ensign.

CHAPTER I.

"Fair sets the wind for France!"

THIS story, like so many others in England's military history, opens at Waterloo Station. We shall abridge the formalities of introducing its central figure, for he can only claim attention in connection with certain military events in which he played a diminutive *rôle*. Indeed, save for the fact that he is wearing the service uniform of one of the Guards' regiments, there is nothing to distinguish him from the thousands of

other second lieutenants, insignificant even as he, whose share in shaping the destinies of the world on the battlefields of France and Belgium has likewise begun at one or other of the great London termini.

Here, then, is our Ensign—a colloquial phrase for referring to a second lieutenant of the Guards, for the title was dropped many years ago—in company with a brother ensign, his fellow-traveller, known to the ante-room at home as “The Lad,” and, like the other, for the first time “proceeding on active service.” They are going out alone—that is to say, not as part of a draft—and beyond the known fact that they are bound for the Guards’ Base Dépôt in France, what military writers call “the fog of war” envelops their future.

“Thank goodness, we’re not conducting a draft!”

Thus our Ensign, as he stood on the platform at Waterloo, to his fellow-traveller, indicating with a jerk of his head

a flushed and heated youth, heavily laden with pack and equipment, who was chivvy-ing a party of men to the train.

"Probably we should get up to the Front quicker if we were!" replied his companion gloomily. Waking and sleeping, The Lad was haunted by the fear that the war would be over before he could get into the firing line.

"We shall get there quick enough, don't you worry!" replied the other; "there's something happening in France. I was at Broadstairs yesterday, and we heard the guns all day!"

For this was in those summer days of 1916, when even in Kent the air throbbed to the unending tremulo of the guns playing the overture to the battle of the Somme.

It was a beautiful morning—a Saturday—and the train was very crowded. The two officers started their journey under the most favourable auspices. On return-

ing to their compartment of the train, after purchasing papers at the bookstall, our Ensign found a bearded cleric seated upon his Wolseley valise on the floor of the carriage, for every seat was taken. The Lad and our young friend made room for the ecclesiastic upon the seat between them, and in the conversation which ensued The Lad identified the stranger as a Bishop travelling down to Winchester to see a school cricket match.

“In this heat,” said The Lad to our Ensign, after taking leave of the Bishop at Winchester, “he must have mentally blessed us for coming to his rescue, so I think we’ve made a pretty good start!”

At the port of embarkation, which the Censor will hardly let me name, a timely hint recurred to them as they drove down to the docks in an ancient fly. The advice had been offered by a veteran of Mons and Ypres.

“Don’t go on board the transport too

early," this authority had said, "or the M.L.O. or one of those fellows will rope you in for the job of O.C. troops going across. They generally pick on somebody who is not conducting a draft!" So the two young officers, having ascertained that the transport would not sail till the late afternoon, dumped their kits on the quay-side and fled back to the town for lunch. Cold beef and pickles and very stale bread and tired butter laid out on a stained tablecloth, in a depressing atmosphere of faded victuals, amid red wall-paper, whisky advertisements, and dyed grasses—truly we English love to soften the pangs of parting from our native shores! Nevertheless the travelling companions made an excellent luncheon, and even professed to recognise feminine allurements in the dingy slattern who served them.

The transport which was to take them to France was not a prison hulk such as bore young Colonel Wesley to his first

taste of active service on the West Indies expedition, nor was she verminous like the coffin ships that conveyed the Guards to Malta in '54; but when it is noted that she was clean, nothing remains to be said. There were a few bunks for officers below; but these were appropriated by the early comers. Everybody else, officers and men, sprawled about on the decks and in the bare open spaces made by clearing out the first and second class saloons—for, in her youth, the transport had been a passenger steamer.

The ship was very crowded. On board were big drafts of the King's Royal Rifles, with their black cross badges, of London Territorials, and of Irish Rifles and Irish Fusiliers, a fine rowdy lot of Irishmen these two last, as well as some yeomanry and various oddments coming back from leave. Our Ensign, who possessed to some extent the faculty of observation, noticed that the leave men did not seem to return to the prospect before them with that blitheness

of heart of which the lady war-writers tell us. On the other hand, the men were by no means gloomy. They just sat about on their packs and smoked their fags and chatted about the good time they had had in Blighty, and cracked a little joke or two about the life to which they were going back.

Our two young Guardsmen walked the upper deck until the transport was well out in the open sea. Then the prostration became so general that progress was a sort of egg-dance. So they turned their steps towards the stairs leading to the lower deck, where they ran into a Grenadier subaltern. They stopped and chatted. He was going back from leave. They told him they were going to the Base.

"Do you think they'll keep us there long?" asked The Lad hastily.

"Can't say," answered the other; "things are pretty quiet up Ypres way."

Then they talked about the amenities of

life in the Salient, and about mutual acquaintances out in France with the Guards' Division and in the Brigade at home.

"I believe there's some kind of restaurant place on board for officers," suddenly remarked the Grenadier; "suppose we go and have something to eat!"

They found a tiny place, literally crammed to the narrow door with officers, packed as tight as herrings in a barrel, round several small tables, the napery of which showed signs of the tossing of the vessel and the rough-and-scramble of the accommodation. Fortunately some one there espied a submarine through the port-hole, and in the ensuing rush for the deck the three officers managed to wedge themselves in at a table. Here, in the course of time, they received successively from the hands of the perspiring stewards a piece of cold beef, a sardine in a saucer, a loaf of bread, considerably damaged, a knife, a spoon, a teapot full of very hot and very strong tea, and a

plate. With these ingredients they contrived to make a very fair supper on the co-operative system.

After that the trio parted company, and our Ensign and The Lad, after much scrambling over prostrate forms, found an empty boat into which they clambered, and slept comfortably till daylight.

Our Ensign awoke to find The Lad shaking him. The rising sun was daubing the wide stretch of sky with a grand splash of colour. The transport was lying alongside a quay where lines of khaki figures were forming up on the greasy planking among cranes, gangways, and stacks of packing-cases.

"Listen!" said The Lad in a reverent voice.

But our Ensign had already heard it—that steady throb of distant cannon, an incessant pounding, as it seemed, upon the roof of the sky.

The guns of the Somme!

An officer, the snout of a megaphone to his face, was bawling orders.

"All leave men to come ashore at once. The remainder stay on board!" he boomed from the quayside.

"H—l!" exclaimed The Lad in a tone which suggested that peace might be declared before they could disembark.

"H—l!" echoed his companion.

Then they went and searched the vessel for breakfast. A Coldstream sergeant, whom The Lad had met on a bombing course somewhere at home, meeting them, volunteered the information that hot cocoa was going in the cook's galley. There, sure enough, our heroes found two grimy-looking privates in their shirt sleeves presiding over dixies of some dark and scalding liquid. The procedure was simple. You grabbed a mug from somebody who had finished—officers and men were all mixed up together in that little place—and had as many dips

as you could contrive in the scrum. Hot cocoa in the chilly dawn is nectar.

Soon after the travelling companions landed, and a very friendly M.L.O. abbreviated formalities for them and indicated an hotel where breakfast and a bath might be obtained before they went on to the Guards' Base Dépôt, the intermediate stage on their journey towards the Front.

The air still vibrated to the throb of distant gun fire. The whole town was throbbing in sympathy. The morning *communiqué* was full of the story of the British successes on the Somme, with a long tale of prisoners and guns captured. People stood about the docks and at street corners in the bright sunshine discussing the great news. At the barber's where they were shaved, at the hotel where they bathed and breakfasted, the new-comers heard little else save enthusiastic comments on the British advance.

Later in the day our Ensign and The

Lad found *themselves staring wide-eyed at a broad stretch of hillside, covered, as far as the eye could see, with a vast and mighty camp—a sea of tents and huts and sheds all astir with life.

Here, presently, they reported at an office in company with a throng of officers from every arm of the service, and were directed to proceed to the portion of the camp set apart for the Guards' Division. A long, well-kept road, fringed on either side with tents and huts of all descriptions, led them through a series of camps, past orderly-rooms and guard-rooms and cinema sheds and Y.M.C.A. huts and church tents, with little gardens and regimental crests worked in white and black stones, to a low slope, dotted with huts and sheds and bell-tents in orderly rows, with a well-known flag floating from a flagstaff on the roof of a long low building.

A white star on a red and blue ground—it was the Brigade flag.

CHAPTER II.

“And look . . . a thousand Blossoms with the Day
Woke . . . and a thousand scattered into clay.”

—OMAR KHAYYÁM.

WITHIN the confines of that camp within a camp, the young officers found themselves at once at home.

In the long pavilion over which floated the Brigade flag, our Ensign and The Lad found the Officers' Mess—a long dining-room and an ante-room, with bright curtains and basket-chairs, and a bridge-table or two, and the latest papers—rather like a golf pavilion. On the white distemper of the wall some one with an artist's hand had executed a few hasty sketches of the Guards in their uniforms of peace time—

an officer in overalls, a private in white fatigue jacket.

In the Mess the new-comers found assembled officers from every regiment in the Brigade—youngsters who had just come out from home, veterans returning to the Front for the second or third time, officers passed for light duty acting as instructors at the great training-ground where drafts of all arms waiting at the *Depôt* underwent a further period of training before being sent up to the firing line. Here our Ensign was joyously hailed by officers of his own regiment, who gave him the latest news from the Front. Here, too, he experienced that first unforgettable shock—he learnt of the death of a brother officer, one who had been his friend, killed in the trenches that very morning.

Along one corner of the little “square,” white bell-tents were pitched in neat array. In these were quartered men from every regiment in the Brigade of Guards, waiting

their turn to be drafted into the firing line. The long stretch of canvas on the hillside, surrounded on every side by similar lines of tents stretching far away into the distance, reminded our Ensign of an old photograph he had seen somewhere of the Guards' camp at Scutari in '54, then, as now, hemmed in all round by the camps of other Brigades.

The camp was the picture of neatness. The well-metalled road traversing it was kept scrupulously clean. The officers were quartered in a little colony of square Armstrong huts, with canvas sides and timber flooring, set up in mathematically precise rows across from the Mess at the foot of a delightful little garden, laid out behind rustic fencing enclosing a Badminton court. The officers' huts were gay with coloured prints cut out of 'La Vie Parisienne' and 'The Sketch,' the little gardens bright with flowers, the natty paths carefully swept. In short, the whole place was the perfection of order.

Life at the Guards' Dépôt in France differed from life with the Guards at home to this extent, that, instead of having their drills on the "square," the men were marched up daily to the common training-ground, situated on a plateau overlooking the camp. Each day one or two officers per regiment were detailed for the uncongenial duty of marching the men of their regiment up the dusty winding hill to the training-ground, one of the pipers of the Scots Guards at their head. The other officers, save the Piquet (or Orderly) Officer who had his round of duties at the camp to attend to, took a short cut to the ground, involving a brief but precipitous climb up a steep hillside.

Our Ensign still carries in his memory a picture of the training-ground as he saw it on that first hot morning. It was a spectacle so overwhelming that it drove from his mind for the moment all the impressions he had been absorbing during

his months of training with the Guards. As he gazed at the vast panorama of the plateau, he felt his heart throb in answer to the patriotic appeal of that picture of Britain in arms. For, from all sides and by every road, he saw dense columns of men converging on a great central parade-ground. With brass band, with drums and fifes, or with pipes and drums at their head, the thick brown columns poured in by every approach, the men in full marching order, their rifles slung, the sweat trickling down their sunburnt faces from their climb up the steep ascent. Cockneys, men of Kent, men of the Midlands, and men of the West country, "Geordies," Lowlanders and Highlanders, Catholics and Orangemen, Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians . . . all were there. You could almost hear the pulse of Empire beat as they swarmed in their thousands on to the parade-ground.

Undulating ripples ran here and there

along the close ranks of that vast host as company after company ordered arms and stood at ease. Commands were shouted: instructors, with yellow arm-bands on their sleeves, ran hither and thither in the press. Still that endless stream of khaki deluged forth on to the parade-ground: still the blare of brass, the squeal of fifes, or the skirl of pipes proclaimed the coming of fresh legions along the roads of the camp.

“Take a good look at that picture!” said a captain of the Coldstream at our Ensign’s elbow, “for you’ve never seen so many British soldiers together before!”

Our Ensign nodded. Truly that place of assembly was an unforgettable sight, a picture that he knew would never fade from his mind.

The Guards’ officers, our Ensign learnt, were to accompany the men of their regiments to the different courses of instruction given at the training-ground — bayonet-fighting, wiring, bombing, and so forth—

under instructors trained in the firing line. Thus he and The Lad presently found themselves listening to a sun-browned sergeant of the H.L.I., whose bonnet looked somewhat incongruous worn with "shorts," expounding in the accents of "Glasgie" the whole art of laying out barbed-wire entanglements. While his men were busy with the prickly rolls of wire, stakes, pickets, and mallet, our Ensign heard French being spoken behind him.

He turned and saw a detachment of Canadians, thick-set, sturdy, and rather swarthy for the most part, drawn up in front of another "wire lecturer" a dozen yards away. By the instructor's side stood a Canadian soldier, a corporal, who, as the lecturer proceeded, translated his remarks rapidly into French.

It was rather an extraordinary performance. The lecturer was a Cockney.

"You tike the stike, . . ." said the lecturer, suiting the action to the word.

"Alors, vous prenez la broche . . . comme ça," fluently translated the interpreter, adding shrilly—

"Mais faites donc attention, nom de Dieu, vous, Le Sage!"

". . . you measure orf five yards, like this 'ere. . . ."

"Et puis, vous mesurez cinq aunes . . . au pas n'est-ce pas?"

Listening with wondering ears, our Ensign realised the strength of the Empire tie that had sent these French Canadians, who could not speak our language, across the seas to war.

It was a scene of amazing activity, that training-ground. The brisk breeze that blew joyfully across the sun-bathed plateau brought with it the sounds and smells of a great fair, fitful bursts of music, bugle-calls, shouts and cries, the pungent odour of horses, the acrid taste of dust, the faint scent of burning wood.

One day a long train of German prisoners

wound its melancholy way through the camp *en route* for England. Our Ensign stood by the roadside as they passed and noted how the indifference faded from the faces of the officers at the head of the *cortège*; how the weary and mud-stained figures behind them shook themselves free from their apathy at the scene of busy movement enacted all around them. The columns marching along the roads, the charging lines of bayonet-fighters, the endless lines of practice trenches, the bustle, the orderly confusion, the noise . . . all this must have made them realise the giant strength piling up behind the fierce onslaught before which they had laid down their arms on the Somme. The sad procession passed our Ensign by with the dawn of a great enlightenment in the eyes of the prisoners.

The forcefulness of the training at the camp was amazing. Men who had got a little stale in long months of training at

some pleasant centre at home were shaken up into life by the galvanising vigour of the instructors' addresses. There was one sergeant in particular, an instructor in bayonet-fighting, to whom our young man never tired of listening.

That sergeant was magnificently built, with the finely developed physique of the army gymnastic instructor. He was simply attired in a vest, khaki trousers and gym. shoes, his short-sleeved jumper leaving open to view a brawny and sunburnt pair of arms that wielded rifle and bayonet as easily as though they were a swagger-cane.

He was a fine picture of British manhood, that sergeant, as he stood bareheaded in the sunshine on the parapet of a trench. Behind him dangled from a long gibbet the sacks of straw upon which presently the budding warrior would test his skill with the bayonet; before him, a sea of sunburnt faces, a wide horseshoe of capless, jacketless men, sleeves rolled up, rifle and bayonet in their

hand. In fluent direct English he would harangue his audience somewhat after this style—

“Now then, lads, just you listen to me for a bit. You all know what you joined the Army for. You didn’t join just to learn a bit of arm-drill, nor yet to polish your buttons and look pretty, nor yet to go out walking with a pack o’ gals . . . yes, I can see a lot of you know all about that too. No! you joined the army *to fight!* That’s what they’ve brought you out here for! *To fight, to kill Germans,* . . . that’s your job out here. You’ve left the gals and the pictures and the pubs behind in England. This here is WAR! D’you know what WAR means? I’ll tell you. War means that if you don’t kill the other feller first, he’ll blooming well kill You! Now you just get that into your thick heads.

“Listen here again! This little friend here” (patting the bayonet), “this little friend o’ mine on my arm . . . some of you

lads have had plenty of little friends on your arms in your time ; I can see that with half an eye, . . . this little sticker here is going to help you to get back home alive to the gals and the pictures and all the rest of it. Shells are all right, the rifle's all right, but it's what's on the end of the rifle that's going to save your life when it's man to man in a stand-up fight.

“When a great hulking Hun sees one of you chaps coming for him close in with the bayonet, what does he do ? Does he send a messenger with his compliments to Fritz at the battery behind him and ask him, please, for a barrage ? Does he lower his sights and take careful aim with his rifle ? Not on your life. For why ? Because there isn't time. The old Hun blooming well knows that if he don't stick You, you'll stick HIM !

“Now you've learnt your bayonet practice, and I could teach you here by the book, so that you'd do it all so pretty you'd make a Guardsman blush. But I can't teach you

quickness: I can't put the ginger into you so as you'll go hell for leather for the Huns first time you see them, and through them and their blooming trench before they can say 'Potsdam.' You don't want to use your brains, you don't want to reason it all out nicely; *you've all, every one of you, got to be the man that sticks first!*

"There's lots of fellers been out here who thought they'd take it easy, and trot up to Fritz and give him a gentle prod and watch him surrender. Do you know where most of those fellers are, lads? Under the ground, that's where they are, with a nice little wooden cross, and a bit of writing atop to say what fine chaps they were. Ah! a dead man's always a hero. But you don't want to be dead, lads! A wooden cross is not the sort of cross you've come out here after. You want to live, and go home to the gals and tell 'em all what a hero you are.

"Now we'll try a little bit of assaulting . . ."

Thus he would run on, the very incarnation of the soldier spirit, erect and manly, the sunshine playing round his light-brown hair and the polished steel of his "little friend."

Despite the manifold interests of the training-ground, time hung rather heavy on the hands of our young man. Every day the very firmament quivered to the distant thunder of the guns; sometimes in the night, particularly towards dawn, the throbbing of the air was so marked as to awaken the officers in their airy huts. There is something uncontrollably unsettling about gun fire. It upset our young man sadly, and he chafed at his detention at the base. As for The Lad, he positively raged.

Sometimes our Ensign marched the party for the training-ground up the hill behind the piper with his kilt of Royal Stuart tartan. Notwithstanding the dusty climb, our Ensign rather liked these marches up the hill and back. The weather was beauti-

fully fine, and the men were always in excellent fettle, so laughter and chaff flew from mouth to mouth. Nothing sharpens wits so well as throwing a few battalions of different regiments together. The humour was generally pointed, but often decidedly witty, and the jokes were always taken in good part. One morning the young officer, plodding along in the dust at the head of the training-ground party, heard a voice behind him exclaim—

“Eyes right to the Welsh Guards, lads!”

The officer instinctively glanced to the right, and saw a gentle nanny-goat gazing sad-eyed from behind the hedge at the column as it passed. This sally at the expense of the regimental pet of the Welsh Guards elicited roars of laughter, in which—in justice, be it said—the Welshmen of the party also joined.

Thus the summer days rolled on, and with every day our Ensign grew browner and fitter for the fray. One evening at the

bridge-table the Adjutant of the Guards' Base Depôt, after opening a message brought in by an orderly, said to our Ensign who was his partner—

“You're for the Guards' Division to-morrow evening, and,” turning round to The Lad who was writing a letter at the window behind him, “you too!”

That night the two young officers went to bed with a joyful heart. To-morrow they were going to the Front.

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The guns of the Somme are throbbing more frantically than ever. Time flies: time presses sorely when the blood runs hotly in the veins. Let us hasten, then, over the ceremony of departure, and pause but for a moment to watch the group at the door of the Mess waving a last farewell to the two figures, girt on with all the panoply of war, stalking into the mellow dusk of a perfect summer evening down

the road to the Camp Commandant's office, where a motor-lorry is waiting to take them to the train.

"Now we shan't be long!" murmured The Lad as the lorry whirled them away through the white dust. He spoke true. Ere three months had run their course that eager spirit was swallowed up and lost in the mirk and reek of those very guns to whose summons he had so impatiently listened.

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It was The Lad who did the trick that secured our young friends a compartment to themselves through both stages of their long journey up to the Front. In the gloomy yard in which their train—of prodigious length, it seemed to be—was drawn up The Lad produced a piece of chalk from his pocket.

"Watch me!" he said with his merry smile.

On the door of the first-class coupé which they had selected for themselves he wrote in chalk—

“O.C. Troops.”

“Infallible!” replied The Lad to his sceptical companion. “A fellow I met at the machine-gun course at Chelsea put me up to the dodge. It scares ’em all away. You see? We shan’t be disturbed!”

Nor were they, though at various times before the train started heavily laden young officers approached the carriage. At the sight of that forbidding inscription, however, they bolted precipitately. And so our young friends journeyed through the night in much comfort to the old French town where they were to change trains and spend the day.

After a shave, a bath, and breakfast, they set out together on a pious pilgrimage to the grave of a friend who for a twelvemonth had lain buried in the British Military Cemetery beyond the racecourse on the

outskirts of the city. Without difficulty they found the simple grave at the foot of its big white cross, with many newer and whiter crosses all around. After consultation with the Corporal Gardener, a First-Gravedigger kind of person with lugubrious mien and Yorkshire accent, they purchased from a genial Frenchwoman at the lodge of the cemetery a number of plants to be put on the grave.

"A'll tell 'er A'll put un in!" said the Corporal Gardener, and, raising his voice to a shout, he bawled at the woman—

"Moa . . . fleurs . . . tombo . . . arpray!"

"Vous allez les planter vous-même?" replied the woman with perfect comprehension—"bon, bon."

And thus, our Ensign reflected, a British graveyard forms a tiny link in the chain of the Entente to bring Normandy and the East Riding together.

After that came an interminable railway

journey lasting from after luncheon that day until far into the next afternoon. But for a tiny break *en route* it would have passed altogether out of our Ensign's mind, that snail-like progress from Normandy to Belgium. Somewhere about the hour of 7 in the morning the long train halted in what seemed to be a tract of flat and barren country. Alighting, our heroes found themselves opposite a long low shed with open doors, giving a glimpse of gleaming urns and piles of bread-and-butter, towards which everybody in the train seemed to be flocking. Behind this wayside canteen our travellers found a small and cheery room, with a bright red-tiled floor, natty curtains, and old-fashioned furniture, where two or three ladies were dispensing breakfast to the officers. In comparison with the boon of breakfast in that barren place, after a long, cold night journey, the charges were outrageously low. But better than the steaming tea, the delicious sandwiches, the

tempting fruit, was that little glimpse of England—the pretty English room, the warm welcome of those devoted English-women in their pleasant English voices.

Nothing more happened to break the tedium of their journey until actually they had set foot to the ground on alighting at their destination.

At that moment, the ears of our heroes were affrighted by a sound, the like of which neither had ever heard before.

CHAPTER III.

WHEE . . . ee . . . ee . . . oo . . .
oo . . . PLUNK !

A rushing noise as of great wings beating the air, a reverberating crash, like the slamming of an iron door, blended with the sound of jangling glass, of splintering wood ; then an unfamiliar, high-pitched cry, "A . . a . . ah !" followed by a mechanical chant on a rising key, as it passed from mouth to mouth—

"Stretcher-bearer !"

The platform of the station was deserted. A very familiar name stared down upon our heroes from the lamps. Their fellow-travelers by the train . . . a handful of all sorts,

officers, Australian privates, some R.A.M.C. orderlies, a couple of Belgian interpreters . . . had long since vanished into safety.

The sky seemed full of odd noises. Every minute or so the new arrivals heard the long-drawn-out whistle of a shell, cut short on its rising note by the crash of the explosion. The first shell they had heard had seemed to strike very close at hand: the succeeding crashes, though equally loud, appeared to be farther away.

Everybody knows the sound of a shell, even when he hears it for the first time. Concerned mainly with the fear lest the other should notice that he "had the wind up," our two young Guardsmen hastily pulled their kits out of the train, and leaving them where they fell on the platform, made for the station-hall.

There they saw two men on their knees beside a stretcher. To the right of them a notice painted in white on a blackboard announced the office of the R.T.O. or Rail-

way Transport Officer, where our young men had to report.

In the R.T.O.'s office, installed in what had probably been a lamp-room or something of the sort, they found most of their fellow-passengers assembled. Under the influence of their original welcome, everybody was conversing in whispers.

The R.T.O. was shortish in his manner. (It is not easy to be polite under shell fire.)

"Report at Headquarters of Guards' Division!" he said curtly to our Ensign and his companion when they had given in their names and regiment.

"Where is -that?" said our Ensign promptly.

Resignedly the officer explained. Yes, it was a goodish way; no, there was no conveyance of any kind; yes, they would have to go through the town; no, it was not safe; the town was being shelled. Had they not heard the shell fall outside the station a minute ago?

“Next! Australian Light Horse?”

The R.T.O. turned to the next man.

“We’ll just have to foot it,” said our hero to The Lad as they made their way outside, “unless we can get a lift of some kind. We’d better leave our kits here in charge of some one!”

Outside in the station-hall our Ensign heard a stamp and a click beside him, a familiar sound, the sound of a Guardsman saluting. Our Ensign turned and saw a private in breeches and spurs, a well-known crest in his cap, an old sleeveless rain-coat flying out behind him like a pair of wings.

“I have a horse for you, sir,” he said, “to take you up to the transport. I couldn’t get here before on account of the shelling.”

Our Ensign and The Lad were going to different battalions. The moment of parting had come.

“Your mess-cart has come for you, sir,” said the groom to The Lad, “but the driver waited outside until the shelling had stopped.

If you will come along with my officer, I can show you where I left him."

On a long country road lined by tall poplars our Ensign found a couple of horses and a little Maltese cart. He and The Lad shook hands; the latter climbed into the cart, while our Ensign mounted a small brown mare. Then the cart rattled off towards the centre of the town, while our Ensign trotted down the road, the groom behind him.

Presently our young man drew rein to allow the groom to come up level. The Ensign began to talk to the soldier.

"They," said the groom, with a jerk of his head in the direction which the mess-cart had taken, "are in rest, sir. Our Battalion is in the line. The Transport Officer thought you would dine with the Transport, and then go up along of him and the rations after dark to-night."

The groom was a veteran of the original Expeditionary Force. So was the little mare

which our Ensign was riding, the man told him.

“Many’s the fine officer that little mare’s carried, sir,” he said, scanning her affectionately: “there was Captain X., him as was killed back at Soupeers, and Captain Y.—it was on the Zillebeke Ridge where he got it, sir—and Captain Z., him as was shot by a sniper in the trenches at Givenchy. Ah! I’ve seen some grand gentlemen go, sir!”

He shook his head mournfully.

“Maybe you’ll want this little switch of mine, sir,” the groom added, handing our Ensign a small ash plant; “one or two draws o’ this won’t be after hurting that little mare, she’s that idle!”

Our Ensign welcomed this change in the conversation. The groom’s train of thought made him slightly uncomfortable in the circumstances.

For a mile or so along the road out of the town the noises still resounded from the sky. The shells came “whooshing” over so loudly

above their heads that our Ensign felt an irrepressible titillation in the neck—a strong inclination to duck. To distract his thoughts, he looked about him.

It was a flat and uninteresting country, but well wooded and very green. Every house they passed was wrecked by shell fire, more or less completely; but he noticed that there were still some civilians about. Practically all the soldiers they met, he observed, were Guardsmen, and, though their cap-stars and buttons were dull and unpolished, their uniforms stained and often badly worn, the men were all well shaved and well brushed, with puttees neatly tied and boots well greased. They were taking their ease in the cool of the evening, standing gossiping in the streets of the villages through which our Ensign passed, or sitting on the benches outside the estaminets.

A ride of more than an hour brought our hero and the groom to a muddy side-track which led into a pleasant green field.

Here a number of tents were pitched. From a field in rear a prodigious squealing of fifes and beating of drums resounded in a hopeless cacophony. "The Drums" (by which generic term, in the Guards, the fife and drum band is understood) of two battalions were practising in separate groups under the trees.

The Transport Officer and the Quartermaster made our Ensign welcome in the mess-tent, gave him a drink and a cigarette, informed him that he was to dine with them, and eventually showed him into the Interpreter's tent, where our hero was much astonished to find his kit lying. It had apparently been wafted there by some supernatural means from the platform at the railway station. This was, of course, the Quartermaster's doing, but our Ensign was as yet too ignorant of usages in the field to appreciate that heaven-sent boon, a good Quartermaster. So he accepted it all as a matter of course, and proceeded to

change his clothes and don warmer things in anticipation of his first night in the trenches.

The Belgian interpreter was sitting on the bed in his tent, warbling a little air to himself. After our Ensign had disabused him of his first impression—namely, that the new-comer proposed to take forcible occupation of his sleeping apartment—he became extremely affable, and produced water and soap and a towel. He was a sunny-natured person with remarkable fluency in English, and made the young officer free of his every possession with unbounded hospitality.

Then our Ensign dined in the mess-tent off an enamel plate, and drank innocuous Belgian beer out of a tin mug. A captain of the Coldstream, who turned out to be the Transport Officer of his battalion, dined with the party. Outside the daylight was failing and a few pale stars had begun to twinkle. The drums had ceased their prac-

tice, but the crickets and the frogs supplied the table-music in their place.

"I hope you can ride," said the Transport Officer to our Ensign, with a note of warning in his voice.

Our Ensign pleaded guilty to a slight familiarity with that gentlemanly accomplishment.

". . . because," the Transport Officer went on, "we have a good eight miles to go, and the limbers with the rations started an hour ago. So we shall have to ride fairly hard for the first part of the way to catch 'em up."

Our Ensign smiled in a superior fashion, as much as to say the other could not ride hard enough for him. "Unconscious of his doom, the little victim plays!" Our young man was to have a rude awakening.

By the time the groom had announced that the horses were waiting, our Ensign was ready for the road. He had to carry on his person his whole panoply of war—

revolver, glasses, compass, gas-helmet, ammunition pouch, and lamp—all slung on his belt, which he was wearing outside his rain-coat. He felt like a trussed fowl, and it required a helping hand from the groom to get him into the saddle. When he was up, the Quartermaster handed him a steel helmet, which the groom slung on the saddle for him. Then the Transport Officer led the way out along the muddy side-track on to a better road, and immediately spurred his powerful horse into a fast trot.

Several thoughts passed through our Ensign's mind in rapid succession. The first was that, if he did not shake "The Fat Lady" (for such was the mare's name) out of her contented amble, he would be left behind in the dark, and irretrievably lost. The second was that, if he went any faster, he must certainly part company with one or other article of his equipment, which was dancing a merry jig round his waist. The third was that he would take an early

opportunity of verifying a suspicion which had crossed his mind at dinner, from certain allusions in the conversation—namely, that the Transport Officer man had acquired his familiarity with horses in the hunting-field in Ireland!

Our young man had retained the ash plant, and, under the influence of half a dozen “dhraws” applied to her flanks at regular intervals, the mare bestirred itself, albeit protesting.

Thus our Ensign rode forth unto battle, in the Ethiopian blackness of a close muggy night, sorely shaken, jingling like a jester, drenched with perspiration, with a feverish eye on the dim figure of the rider jogging briskly through the darkness ahead of him.

Far away in the distance, vivid white lights spouted continually into the sky. Of gun fire there was little. It seemed a quiet night. By the roadside, from time to time, the jagged silhouette of a broken wall, a tottering chimney, a devastated

church tower, stood out against a patch of lighter cloud. Figures took shape suddenly out of the gloom, marching in silence through the night, filling the empty road with the acrid smell of hot and dirty men, filling the air with the crunch-crunch of their feet. Guns jingled past them at the trot, with cursing drivers plucking at their horses' heads to keep their teams to the road.

Presently, a continuous rumbling echoed out of the patch of blackness enveloping the road ahead. Low voices came back with snatches of conversation. The dark outline of a long string of tossing limbers loomed out of the gloom. The Transport Officer galloped off up to the head of the column. A whistle sounded. The rumbling ceased. The limbers stopped. The Transport Officer's voice spoke out of the darkness; our Ensign could not see the speaker.

"We send our horses back here,"—our

Ensign heard him spring to the ground,—
“better put your helmet on now! We are going to walk, and we generally get shelled to blazes over this next bit that’s coming!”

Stiffly, our Ensign slipped his foot out of the stirrup and precipitated himself from the saddle. He was wondering to himself whether all wars were as uncomfortable as this one. He had only thought of death on active service as a quick finish in the midst of an exhilarating charge at the head of an excited band—not of a death that came screaming suddenly at you out of the dark, when you were clammy and stiff and tired, and generally uncomfortable!

The young man doffed his cap, and carried it in his hand. He put on his helmet. It was heavy, and hideously unwieldy. He felt it would topple over on his nose with very little provocation.

They plodded on in silence at the head of the rumbling limbers. After an hour’s

walk through the blackness (our Ensign had not the remotest idea where they were), the blurr of many figures sitting about the grass of the roadside bulked out in the gloom. The Transport Officer switched on his light. The familiar features of the Drill Sergeant who had initiated our hero into the intricacies of squad drill at home stood revealed in the bright beam. About him, in silent groups, were the ration parties, who, without delay or confusion, set about the work of unloading the limbers.

The night was singularly quiet. Not a gun spoke. Never a shell came to justify the Transport Officer's gloomy forebodings. Only from the higher ground ahead, the never - ceasing fountain of white lights showed that the opposing lines of trenches were unremitting in their vigilance.

Darkness not only obscures the eyes,—it also clouds the memory. The next thing our Ensign remembers was coming

to what looked like a row of ancient *tumuli* in a field and a gap in a hedge which seemed to be shaken by a violent wind, though the night was perfectly still. There was a loud "swish . . . swish . . ." in the air and a quick "patter . . . patter . . ." all around. Then a voice said very distinctly out of the darkness—

"Blast that machine-gun!"

The swishing sounds ceased, our Ensign turned on his lamp and saw an officer in a Burberry with a revolver hung on his belt worn outside. The new arrival instantly recognised him as one of the most joyous spirits of the ante-room at home. He was known to all and sundry as "Peter."

"Hullo!" said the other, switching on his light, "there you are! I didn't know if you'd be up to-night or not. I believe you're coming to our company. I suppose you are going to see the Commanding Officer now. He's in the dug-out. I'm

out with a carrying party. See you later. Where the devil's that orderly gone?"

He turned off his light and was swallowed up in the dark amid a shuffling throng of men. Our Ensign found the Commanding Officer in a small dug-out with a very low entrance. Candles in white metal candlesticks threw a yellow light over a roughly carpentered table, where maps were spread out amid the remains of a meal. In the corner an officer was bending over a telephone.

"This is the Adjutant speaking," he was saying, "... oh, that is Mr Barnard ... right ... Minnies were they ... yes, it sounded like them ... not in the trench ... good ... right ... we'll get retaliation!"

"Four Minnies into No. 1 Company, sir," he said, putting down the receiver and addressing the Commanding Officer; "Barnard thinks he'd like some retaliation. Shall I ask for it?"

The Commanding Officer nodded and offered the Transport Officer and our Ensign a drink. Then he told our Ensign that he would be attached to No. 2—Peter's company,—the latter was commanding in the absence of the regular company commander who was on leave. The company was at present in support in trenches close at hand. The battalion was coming out of the line the next night. Then they talked of the general situation, the advance on the Somme, the situation in the Salient, what the Russians were doing, whether the Rumanians would come in. Finally, our Ensign took his leave, and the Transport Officer escorted him along the trench to a small and extremely evil-smelling dug-out, where they found a Grenadier subaltern working out chess-problems on a travelling chess-board, by the light of a candle stuck in its own grease on the table. He explained to the Transport Officer that he was in command of two platoons left be

hind to help with the carrying work at night.

That night our Ensign slept in a low narrow hole, scraped out of the parados of the trench. On turning in, he found that his servant, whom he had brought up with him from the Base, had spread the dug-out with nice clean sandbags. With his haversack for a pillow, and his rain-coat spread over him as a wrap, the new-comer, who had never spent a night out of bed in his life before, slept solidly for eight hours. When he awoke the trenches were flooded with sunshine, and a most comfortable smell of hot bacon stole across the clear morning air.

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The company was not in the firing line, so that the men could move pretty freely in and about the trenches. The weather was very fine and warm, and the existence was not strenuous. The following evening Peter marched half the company away into re-

serve, on relief by another battalion, leaving our Ensign behind, with two platoons to help with the carrying. In two days' time our hero would rejoin his battalion in reserve.

The new arrivals in the company Mess in the dirty little dug-out were genial souls. Our Ensign took his meals and played chess with them, and discussed the papers which came up with the utmost regularity in company with the letters every afternoon. After dark our young man slung his lamp and his revolver on his belt and went round the trenches and the outposts, his orderly at his heels, a Celtic type of youth, Mac-Finnigan by name.

The two days passed pleasantly enough. There was a little sporadic shelling, generally after the passage of a Hun aeroplane, glittering aloft, with black crosses on the under-surface of its planes, amid little puffs of shrapnel and the "peugh . . . peugh . . . peugh" of the anti-aircraft guns. The first afternoon—it was at tea—two sharp salvos

of whizz-bangs rang out from farther up the trench. Our Ensign sallied forth to review the situation. Up the trench he found a big Grenadier lying on his face motionless in a great welter of blood, while round the traverse an Irish Guardsman was flat on his back on the trench-boards, a little rosary between his fingers, with a stretcher-bearer ripping up one of his puttees, which was soaked with blood.

The wounded man lifted a pallid face to the officer as he came up. The stretcher-bearer was soothing him gently as he worked.

"Be asy now," he was saying, "a little skelp like that won't kill yez. I'll put yez in the dug-out beyond . . . ye'll be grand and snug there till it's dark, and then we'll take yez down."

"The others is all right, sir," the stretcher-bearer added to our Ensign; "him round the traverse was killed on the spot, but there's nobody else touched barrin' this chap here!"

The wounded man said nothing, but his breath came heavily. His face was very pale. The officer saw him tucked away into the dug-out, and went back to tea with a heavy heart. It was his first casualty. . . .

The next night our Ensign led his two platoons out of the trenches in the wake of a guide sent up to meet them. He was a little disappointed to find how lightly his responsibility as an officer rested upon him. He had not the least idea of where they were going as they followed the guide out into the darkness.

Their journey came to its finish on a timbered walk, leading past a long array of shelters dug out of a bank and protected by layers of neatly built-up sandbags. Everybody had gone to bed, for it was after 2 A.M.—that is, everybody save our Ensign's servant, who, after our hero had seen his men safely into their quarters, led the officer into a fine roomy dug-out with a wooden door

and wooden flooring. There, on a bed made of sacking stretched over a framework, he found his sleeping-sack spread, with his pyjamas on top ; his canvas washing-bucket, full of hot water, smoked on a primitive-looking washstand ; while a complete change of clothes was laid out on a soap-box beside the bed.

“And what time will I call you in the morning, sir ?” said Johnson — such was the name of our Ensign’s servant—at the door.

“What time is parade ?” asked the officer.

“There’s no parade for you, sir,—only rifle inspection at eleven. Perhaps you’d care for a bath in the morning, sir !”

Our Ensign jumped at the suggestion and ordered a hot bath for half-past nine. He crept gratefully into his sleeping-bag, his mind bewildered by the sudden contrasts in his new and remarkable life. . . .

CHAPTER IV.

THE period in reserve had brought the whole battalion together once more. The companies were no longer separated as they had been in the trenches. Our Ensign found the officers established in regular messes in the sand-bagged shelters of this pleasantly rural retreat, and the whole routine of the Guards running smoothly on very similar lines to the life in barracks at home.

Life was not at all strenuous in reserve—at any rate not in the day-time. In the trenches the men get short commons in the way of sleep, so during the period in reserve they are not worked very hard. At night,

however, fatigue parties were generally sent up to the support or front lines on various digging undertakings. Otherwise, a rifle inspection in the morning, and sometimes, additionally, an inspection of feet (an army may fight on its stomach, but it marches on its feet) or of gas helmets, was the only parade of the day.

Each company took it in turn to be "in waiting"—that is to say, to be in readiness for any emergency. The company in waiting furnished the guards and fatigue parties for any special jobs about the camp. During the period in waiting, which lasted twenty-four hours, from one afternoon to the afternoon of the following day, the officers of the company in waiting were not supposed to leave the precincts of the camp, and, the company commander excepted, they took it in turns, during the period "in waiting," to act as Piquet Officer, whose functions in reserve were practically confined to stamping the letters with the

battalion censor stamp in the Orderly Room (a sand - bagged shelter), before the post corporal collected the mail in the afternoons.

Our Ensign slipped very easily, almost imperceptibly, into his place as a tiny cog in the great wheelwork of the army in France. He came out prepared to have a roughish time in very congenial company—and in neither respect was he disappointed. The Mess in which he found himself had all the attraction of a cosmopolitan club in miniature. His fellow - officers in the company to which he had been posted—No. 2—had what was known as a double-company mess with the officers of No. 1 Company. At the quarters in reserve the mess was located in an ambitious sort of sand - bagged shelter, with stain - glass windows, timber floor and walls, a white deal sideboard (home - made), and a long table and chairs. Here our Ensign met his company commander, a serene and

placid person, with a somewhat judicial manner, who, for that reason, answered to the name of "The Beak." Most of the other officers our Ensign had known at home, so that he did not feel so much an intruder as he had feared he would.

The double-company mess was a very happy family. In every stratum of society type balances type. It is this easy counterpoise that makes the world revolve. That great leveller, the War, has thrown together in officers' messes for a spell of intimate association a number of men whose pursuits in other circumstances would all have radiated in different directions. In that mess there were, amongst others, a brace of budding diplomats, two Balliol undergraduates, a rancher, a "literary gent.," and an engineer. Some of the officers had decided to adopt the Army as their profession, and to remain on in the regiment after the war, but others would simply return to their pur-

suits and professions on the proclamation of peace. The pleasant *cameraderie* which reigned in the double-company mess must be based, our Ensign decided, on the equilibrium of all these different temperaments and mental outlooks balanced one against the other. So far as regimental duties were concerned, every type was tempered down to the average consistency given by the identical training which every Guards' officer receives on the square at home.

Therefore, though many and furious were the arguments on every conceivable topic with which the young lions of the double-company mess whiled away their leisure hours, there was perfect accord in the general realisation by each of his duties and responsibilities as an officer. In the privacy of the mess there might be heated wrangles regarding the respective merits of No. 1 and No. 2 Companies; but the whole mess presented a solid front in

backing the two companies against the rest of the battalion, the battalion against the rest of the Brigade, and the regiment against every other regiment in the Brigade of Guards.

Our Ensign had two or three spells in reserve at this peaceful spot, and always looked forward to returning to it after the battalion's turn of duty in the trenches. There was practically no shelling; any German shells that came over mostly fell in a more exposed position several hundred yards away. All around them lay spread out the fair garb in which summer dresses the Belgian countryside, and not even the ruined farms or the shell-scored roads could detract from the beauty of the poppies and corn-flowers running wild among the neglected fields, or the roses and the hollyhocks and the snapdragon that bloomed in the little gardens of the ravaged farms.

The men revelled in the snatch of quiet,

in the pleasant surroundings, in the beautiful summer weather. When their day's work was done they sat about in the shade, writing letters home, reading the newspapers, or idly watching the afternoon spectacle of German *v.* British aeroplanes. Some spent every moment of their leisure in dragging one of the canals in which Belgium abounds for fish. The drag-net was a marvel of ingenuity, constructed as it was out of rabbit netting, barbed wire, bits of string, sandbags, and branches, towed along by eager hands on either bank. Incredible as it may seem, the fishermen made quite respectable catches of pike and eels, which they cooked for supper over wood-fires, and consumed with relish,—all heedless of dark allusions by their less enterprising comrades to the fabled discovery of portions of a German helmet in the maw of one of these aquarian monsters.

The officers went for walks in the neigh-

bourhood, extending their rambles, with the perversity of youth, to the ruined city of Ypres, still the shell-trap *par excellence* of the countryside for miles around. One afternoon, a subaltern in our Ensign's mess who went by the name of Apollo, from his statuesque appearance, and who was a perfect Baedeker of information about the local attractions wherever the battalion went, took Peter and our Ensign and one of the Balliol men, known as The Don, to a certain field where, among various shell-holes and felled apple-trees, a few rows of depressed currant bushes yet lingered. The currants were red and scanty and abominably sour, and an unusually large number of "dud" shells were falling in dangerous proximity to the party from an "Archie" or anti-aircraft gun that was vigorously shelling a German raider. There was plenty of fresh fruit in the mess where the young men could have sat in the cool of the shelter and eaten their fill, but they preferred to stand in the hot

afternoon sun and munch unripe currants at imminent risk of their necks. 'Truly youth is a wonderful thing !

Another day a band of them strolled out over the fields to a certain billet, where previously the battalion and other Guards' battalions had been quartered for some time. There they visited the pretty garden which the Guards had laid out with wonderful centre-pieces, representing the different regimental crests of the Guards in coloured stones. But, while the Guards had been away, the heathen had raged. There were shell-holes in the garden, and the rains had begun to gnaw at the centre-pieces. . . . In the Salient everything, living and dead, seems vowed to destruction.

The night fatigues were dull, dangerous, and depressing. Night after night parties sallied forth with pick and spade, often in gum-boots, if there was work to be done on a wet trench, and plodded through the darkness to a more or less apocryphal rendezvous.

All the open ground close up to the Front in the Salient is sprayed by machine-gun fire at night, and a brisk burst of shell fire in addition was no uncommon experience for the nightly fatigue parties. Sometimes the sapper folk would be late at the trysting-place, and the men would stand huddled up together like a flock of sheep on a moor, while the officers would fret and fume and mutter dire menaces about "reporting the fellow to the Brigade." Then the sapper would arrive, and the officer, about to deliver himself of a few weighty and well-considered remarks on punctuality, which is the politeness of soldiers as well as of kings, would find himself confronted by an obsequious R.E. corporal protesting that the "orficer" was "jest over there."

Translated into the plain language of fact, this indication might mean anything from 300 yards to a mile; but at length the sapper officer would appear, silencing with honeyed words and profuse apology the

torrent of reproach bubbling at the Guardsman's lips. After that the sapper officer would take charge, and the Guards' officer would find his *rôle* restricted to walking up and down for anything up to three or four hours, bored to tears, unable even to smoke, because smoking on these night fatigues is forbidden to the men. He had not even the mental occupation of keeping the men to their task. They knew that they could not go home to bed until the job was finished, whatever it was, and therefore every man worked with a will, jackets discarded, sleeves rolled up.

Everybody who has been up in the Salient knows what the "trenches" there are like. The Hun holds the high ground everywhere: he has the dry soil, the observation. In the British lines the ground is so wet that a foot below the surface you strike water . . . and probably a dead man as well, so thick do they lie in this blood-drenched region. Therefore the para-

pets are for the most part built up, and indeed the whole defences—parapet, traverses, and parados—have to be built up with sandbags, which, under the influence of shell fire and the weather, have to be continually renewed and repaired.

A parapet that will shelter a platoon of the line will not do for a platoon of Guardsmen. It is a question of inches. When the Gurkhas relieved the Guards in the trenches in the Béthune region early in the war, the Guards had to put a double tier of sandbags along the fire-step so that the little hillmen could look over the top of the parapet. Therefore, in the Salient, it often happened that the Guards found themselves sheltering in the open behind a thin parapet in bad repair, behind which they had to kneel in order to protect themselves against the enemy snipers.

Work, with a capital "W," loomed large in the orders of every company commander of the Guards in the Salient. In truth,

there was much to be done. In places, the trench lines were not connected, parapets were low and by no means bullet-proof, paradosses were distinguished mainly by their absence. Thus, when one battalion of Guards relieved another in the Salient, it took over not only the trench but a vast programme of "improvements," as the house-builders say.

The first night our Ensign went up to the front line with the company, the Guards' battalion which they were relieving had a big scheme of work to hand over. As junior officer, our Ensign was given charge of the men in the front line, for the first half of their turn "in," whilst The Beak and Peter remained, according to usage, in the company headquarters in the support line. For the second half, Peter was to relieve our Ensign.

While the relief was being effected, an ensign of the outgoing company took our young man round the trench, and, with the air of a Commissioner of the Office of

Works, showed the new-comer the work which had been begun, which the incoming company was to finish. The barbed wire was probably defective and would have to be inspected and possibly repaired; here they had put in three new traverses; here they had repaired the parapet that had been blown in by an enemy trench mortar; there they had started to build a parados; this part of the parapet was not bullet-proof . . . they had had a man wounded passing there the previous day; and so on, and so forth. The officer explained everything with admirable lucidity, and then, his men having all filed out, trotted away, leaving our Ensign, rather bewildered, standing on a precarious trench-board, half immersed in yellow water, with an overpowering odour of death in his nostrils.

Both The Beak and Peter presently came up to help him over his difficulties at his first taste of trench warfare, and together they mapped out a scheme to spread the

work remaining to be done over the time they were to spend in the front line. The platoon sergeants were called into consultation: they had already got the sentries posted in the fire-bays, and the rest of the men they set at the task of filling sandbags. It was agreed that our Ensign should go out and have a look at the wire, and also the outside of the parapet, to see how it could best be made bullet-proof.

A little later the officer, in company with his orderly, his rifle slung at his back, a handsome and self-possessed young man, who was introduced as the wiring corporal, and a rugged Irish sergeant called Kinole, slung his leg over the parapet and dropped out into the open on the other side.

It was a dark windy night. In front of them the German star-shells were soaring aloft, and the night was alive with noises reverberating in the darkness. Machine-guns on both sides coughed their harsh "tack-tack . . . tack-tack-tack." Rifle

shots rang out here and there ; and every now and then, with a bang and a whizz, a Verey light whirred up into the dark sky from the trenches behind the little party. Somewhere on the right a mighty British *strafe* was in progress : our Ensign could hear the steady racket of the shells and see their orange flicker in the sky as they burst against the surrounding blackness.

The chinking of tools resounded very faintly out of the dark in front of them.

" 'Tis Fritz out workin'," muttered Sergeant Kinole hoarsely. " Iv'ry night 'tis the same, sir. . . . He works like anny ould mole."

The party crossed a very wet ditch and came to the wire. Here the wiring corporal took the lead and they all crawled along behind him, bending their heads low, as he did, to examine the strands of wire against the sky. In places the wire was broken and would have to be replaced.

Then our Ensign took a look at the

parapet from the outside. There was no room to strengthen it from within, and outside the trench the ground sloped away into a morass. The only thing would be to lay an earth foundation and build it up on that. The sergeant hopped back into the trench, and presently returned with a horde of bulky figures with pick and shovel who scrambled over the parapet, and, dropping on the other side, started shovelling dry earth on to the wet ground at the foot of the parapet.

All night they worked and shovelled and built, inside and outside the trench, while the star-shells spouted and the machine-guns rapped loudly. With the first flicker of dawn they trooped in, and then, while the dawn was breaking sullenly, the men stood to on the fire-step all along the trench, while our Ensign, empty and cold and dreadfully sleepy, wondered why the trench smells were so overpoweringly accentuated in the early morning.

With the coming of dawn the men stood down, our Ensign inspected rifles, the Commanding Officer, on his daily round of the trenches, appeared and asked him a question or two, and after that, amid a general sizzling of bacon all along the trench, the officer made for the earthen cave which had been pointed out to him as his quarters. There was the faithful Johnson with a mug of hot cocoa ; there was our Ensign's blanket and his air-pillow arranged on a carpet of clean sandbags.

Our young man slept until ten o'clock, and then rose to find his washing things spread out in the sunshine, Johnson close by boiling his shaving water in a mess tin. He made a leisurely toilet, then sauntered down the communication trench to the company headquarters, where he breakfasted joyously with The Beak and Peter off eggs and bacon and tea and bread-and-butter and strawberry jam. Of course the double-company mess was broken up when the battalion was

in the line, so, by mutual arrangement, No. 1 Company took the mess cook, and No. 2 the mess waiter. It was the latter, rather more dishevelled than his wont, who served the three officers at breakfast in a tiny dug-out four feet square.

One turn in the trenches is very much like another. Sometimes they got shelled, and on the first occasion, our Ensign, emerging rather hastily from his cubby-hole to find out what the noise was about, was shamed into complete nonchalance by the unshakable phlegm of the men. He soon learned to adopt the prescribed air of indifference to such attentions from the enemy, but, like most people, he never got used to shelling. Once or twice he went out patrolling with his orderly, a completely fearless, wholly unsqueamish, and eminently practical young man. It was a messy business, crawling through the wet grass in the dark, and rather trying to the nerves. But, as a sage friend of our Ensign's used to say,

"If you can't see the Hun, he can't see you," and our young man more than once drew comfort from this practical maxim as he and MacFinnigan crawled through No Man's Land with eyes and ears strained for sight or sound of the enemy.

Letters and newspapers arrived with unfailing regularity in the front line every afternoon at tea-time. So they knew all about the great events that were happening on the Somme, especially as the latest bulletins came up daily from the army headquarters, and were stuck up (by means of a cartridge driven into the sand-bag walls) outside the company headquarters. Everybody speculated endlessly as to the moment when the Guards would be hurled into that boiling cauldron in the south. Rumours of all kinds were rife : everybody had his own theories and "information," especially the men. Our Ensign used to hear them gossiping round their breakfast

fires in the trenches, where every cookhouse rumour was thoroughly examined.

At last one day, when the Battalion was expecting to go out of the trenches altogether for several weeks' rest, it was reported that the Somme was its next destination. This time rumour spoke true. About one o'clock A.M., on a mellow summer night, the Battalion marched quietly by companies across the market-place of an old Belgian town, where it would in a day or two entrain for the Unknown.

CHAPTER V.

AND now the scene changes. The stage is set afresh for another act of the great drama in which our hero plays the leading part or the tiniest of *rôles*, according as we take his conception or history's of the great events amongst which his life is running its course. For, by analysis, war is found to be made up of millions of little dramas in which the "lead" is played by every single combatant, in which the greatest actors may have but the shadowiest of *rôles*, in which the most portentous moments of history are but "noises of." It is only the historian, coldly surveying the stage through the lorgnette of posterity,

who can disentangle the myriad threads of these subsidiary incidents and weave them into the mighty drama, in which the great actors are seen in their proper rôles, where such pygmies as our Ensign are but blurred figures in a vast stage crowd, a moving background, as it were,—after the Meiningen school of the drama,—against which the events of history are enacted.

The scene shifts, then, from Belgium to France. Gone are the flat plains, the ugly red-brick houses, uglier than ever now that war has stripped them from roof to cellar; gone the dull, straight roads with their strip of uneven, red-hot *pavé* in the centre; gone that everlasting ragged silhouette of Ypres' ravaged towers, seen from every angle of the salient; gone the stagnant canals, the dirty *estaminets*. Slow and protesting, with many halts, the train bearing the Battalion southward, through the heat and dust of a blazing summer day, leaves the Belgian scene of war behind.

It carries them deep into the fair land of France, among the green hills and undulating valleys, the long white roads, the pretty and prosperous villages, the old-world chateaux with their seigneurial dove-cots and weather-stained towers peering forth from the summer foliage, the natty *auberges* with their white-curtained windows and little tables before the door. This is all but the "front cloth," however, behind which the stage is being set for the drama in which the Battalion is yet to play its part. This fair picture of France, spread out in the warm afternoon sunshine, is only the foreground. Behind it somewhere, where the guns are growling dully, lies the Unknown, the Land of Adventure for which they are ultimately bound.

Motor-lorries met them at the railhead where their train journey ended, and whirled them, in a long procession of white dust-clouds, to a large and comfortable village where already other Guards' battalions were

lodged. As the men, white as masons with the dust, descended from the lorries, our Ensign looked about him. There was the Billeting Officer, perspiring and protesting (as is the way of the Billeting Officer), the quartermaster-sergeants, his accomplices, beside him. On every door stood the traces of their handiwork. "2 Platoons, No. 1 Coy.," "1 Platoon, No. 4 Coy.," "Pioneers," "2 officers,"—these were some of the inscriptions our Ensign saw scrawled in chalk on the doors of houses and sheds and on the posts of the farmyard gates.

Three platoons of his company, our young man discovered, were billeted in the buildings of a big yard behind an estaminet, a number of large sheds and outhouses, some of red brick, others with merely wattle walls, running round three sides of the yard. Our Ensign ardently desired a wash and also a drink, but he found that all the officers were busy looking after the comfort of their men, seeing that their

quarters were reasonably clean, and inquiring from the dispassionate French peasants as to facilities for water. That is the rule of the army, — the men first, the officers afterwards.

So our young man lost no time in following the example of The Beak and Peter, and visited his platoon in their billet. They were very well off, for their lodging was in a large, dry, clean loft, with a cement floor, above the stables. He and his brother officers between them were successful in begging some straw off the lady of the estaminet, whose sole concern appeared to be for her fowls. . . . *Ah, Monsieur, il y avait des Anglais chez nous qui ont volé mes poules. . . . Oh, la, la, qu'ils ont volé! . . .*

But our Ensign soothed her fears by clinching on the spot a contract for eggs for the double-company Mess, as long as the Battalion should be there, and by paying down five francs on account. Quite

mollified, the lady showed them a horse-pond near by where the men might wash, and the village well, where (after due analysis of the water by the doctor, in accordance with the Brigade order) the men might draw drinking water.

Leaving the men, stripped to the waist, carrying in their hands little ends of soap and rather dingy towels, swarming about the horse-pond, our Ensign and his brother officers fared forth to locate their own quarters. In the village street they found the Billeting Officer the centre of an indignant group. In the whole of B——, he announced, wiping his damp brow, there were but four beds for officers—the company commanders were to have these,—the rest must forage for themselves. The double-company Mess was quartered in the estaminet behind which the greater part of our Ensign's company was billeted. There might be some tents for officers later. . . .

There was a chorus of obloquy. What

slackness on the part of the Billeting Officer! Had one ever heard the like? Why, the place was full of comfortable-looking houses where, for a franc or two, one might get a clean and comfortable bed! One wouldn't mind paying . . .

The discussion lasted whilst the young lions of the double-company Mess lapped up white wine and soda in the dark and filthy back-room of the estaminet where the mess was situated. Poultry walked between their legs: there were millions of flies: a dishevelled wench stirred a saucepan over a red-hot stove, and ancient, gnarled peasants, murmuring "*Bien le bon jour, m'sieurs!*" entered and sat down with them at the table. Apparently the back-room was a kind of village club. In the front room of the estaminet, judging by the trampling of feet and the frantic cries of "Doo beer, Ma!" the greater part of the Battalion was refreshing itself after the heat of the day.

Peter had a servant, a prodigy among men, and a pearl among servants, which his name was Cardwell. Even our Ensign lowered before the Admirable Cardwell the banner he bore so proudly aloft on behalf of the faithful Johnson. For Cardwell spoke French: Cardwell knew the ways of the peasants: Cardwell had been known to extract a meal and a bed out of the dourest old harridan who ever bolted her door with the cry—“*Je ne veux pas des soldats chez moi!*”

So Peter drew our Ensign aside, and whispered—

“Cardwell will find us something: leave it to Cardwell!”

But even Cardwell drew a blank in B——; he returned to the estaminet, where his “master,” as the soldier servants say, was sitting hopefully among the flies and the poultry and the peasants, and ruefully announced his failure. The village was overflowing with refugees from the occupied

territory (under the French Government relief scheme): the Billeting Officer had spoken true,—there was not a bed in the place. But then the faithful Johnson came to the rescue. In the courtyard of the estaminet he had laid out soap and water and a towel for our Ensign to have that much-needed wash; and he informed his “master” that tents were to be had, and if our Ensign would furnish the men to draw the tent from the Quartermaster, and indicate a spot where it should be pitched, he would attend to it at once. There was a clean garden behind the estaminet which might do, the man added.

Peter and our Ensign inspected the spot, and decided that it would do: the needful authority was obtained from The Beak, the tent was pitched behind the estaminet, and the two officers had their kits deposited therein, thereby inaugurating a tent partnership which lasted through the summer.

That evening a select party consisting

of our Ensign, Peter, Apollo, The Don, and a tall and serious-minded subaltern of their Mess, whom everybody called Roderick, dined in state at a hotel in a neighbouring town, to which they were conveyed through the kindly offices of a motor-ambulance driver. There, among all kinds of big-wigs of the Guards' Division, they ate a thoroughly bad dinner, at an extortionate price, washed down by utterly spurious *Château Laffitte*, and professed themselves hugely delighted with their evening. It was a glorious summer night, and when they got back to their billet Peter and our Ensign pulled their valises out of the tent and slept beneath the stars.

As the result of an argument on the art of foraging on active service, springing from severe strictures on the paucity of the fare at the double-company Mess, Peter and our Ensign were bidden to dinner the next night with a brother officer, who professed, after experience of active service in half a dozen

wars, to be able to get an epicurean meal in any village, no matter how short local supplies were—and B—— was very short. The troops going through on their way to the Somme had seen to that!

The veteran acted as his own cook, and the four—for one of the company commanders made up the *parti carré*—dined under an apple-tree, beneath the stars, off three young ducks and two young chickens, with delicious fresh peas and new potatoes. The guests contributed, as their share of the repast, two bottles of *Roederer* purchased in the neighbouring town.

As a dinner it was a *tour de force*, for heaven alone knows what blandishments these succulent dishes represented: as a meal, it was a frankly gluttonous performance. Our Ensign, who was Piquet Officer that day, felt that he could scarcely walk, so gorged was he with food, when he rose from the table under the apple-tree to go and turn out the guards. But in war you

learn to be thankful for what you can get to-day, for the morrow is ever uncertain.

The Battalion arrived at B—— on a Sunday, and at six o'clock on the following Tuesday morning it was on the road again. It rendezvoused with the rest of the Brigade at a given point *en route*, from which the whole Brigade marched to its destination at V——, some seventeen or eighteen miles distant.

The day was a regular "scorcher." Even at the early hour of their departure there was a touch of fiery heat in the sun's rays. There was not a cloud in the sky, and already the heat was shimmering among the corn-stooks in the stubble. The road was deep in dust, and every wayside leaf was powdered white.

The country was terribly hilly, and the men—who were in marching order, their steel helmets strapped on the back of their packs—were sweating freely even at the end of the first mile of the march. Trench

warfare gives the men scant opportunity for exercise, and a long march in the summer heat over hilly roads with a heavy load is a strain on the fittest of troops.

But the men made light of the heat and the dust as they trudged along, marching at ease with their rifles slung, with the drums crashing out in front of them. When soldiers are standing a march well, there is a constant ripple of conversation, of chaff, and little snatches of song running up and down the ranks. The men were frankly delighted with the pretty French countryside, the cows in the fields, the sheep on the uplands, the geese and ducks and cocks and hens in the villages—all these were reminders of their country homes, reminders such as they had seldom seen in the mournful land of death from which they had come. A donkey braying behind a hedge, a drove of pigs on the road, set them all a-laughing. Like children, they commented in a running vein of criticism upon everything they saw.

“Och!” said a voice behind our Ensign, “’tis kilt I am wid the heat intoirely. Did ye ever see the like o’ thim lads in front? Sure, they’re runnin’ us off our legs!”

“’Tis the same old game,” declaimed disdainfully Sergeant Kinole, plodding along at the head of the platoon; “I know them lads in front of the company! One, two—left, right—keepin’ the step with the Company Commander’s horse. I declare to God we’ll all be goin’ on our hands and knees be the time we get in!”

This flight of fancy elicited a general laugh. Then the running commentary broke out afresh. A venerable-looking old peasant was digging in a field.

“Bon jour, Daddy!” cried a voice.

“Is ut diggin’ spuds ye are?” asked another.

“Arrah, let him be,” said a deep voice. “’Tis diggin’ his own grave he is, th’ ould rascal!”

The “ould rascal” looked up from his

digging with a sheepish, toothless grin, and the Battalion tramped by in a cloud of dust and a ripple of jests and laughter.

They joined up with the Brigade and marched on, drums beating gaily in front, baggage-limbers and carts and cooks trailing out to the rear, through the torrid heat. The passing of the Brigade was an event in the little town where our Ensign and his friends had dined. The streets were crowded, every window had its frieze of faces, every shop-door its knot of gossips, to see the column go by. It was the first time for a century that the Guards had been in those parts.

The heat was truly terrific. The sun beat down fiercely out of a brazen sky. The dust was choking: the hills merciless. The chatter and the chaff gradually died away, and when the whistles sounded for the regulation halt at the end of each hour of marching, the men fell out, dragged off their packs and dropped heavily on the grass.

At last, when the sun was high in the sky, they reached their destination. V—— was a straggling little village built on either side of the slope of the white high-road, smothered in dust, shaken to its very foundations by the incessant rumbling of motor - lorries passing through, with a soporific and neglected - looking château, where ducks promenaded solemnly in the courtyard, a wisp of river and a camp of huts.

The men were lodged in the huts,—regular cauldrons of heat they were, too, infested by flies,—pitched on an unprotected slope of sun-baked earth from which every blade of grass had been trodden. Huts had been set apart for the officers, but they would have none of them. Some one, with a taste for epigram, said the place looked like a dismantled poultry show. The officers, one and all, voted for quarters in the open air, as the weather was so beautifully fine.

After various negotiations, in which Apollo, who had the gift of tongues, played a leading rôle, permission was obtained from the local *châtelain*, who was henceforth known and is referred to in this narrative as The Baron, to pitch tents on the grass in a pleasant old apple orchard across the road from the huts. In this picturesque old-world *verger* the officers of the Battalion were lodged. Headquarters' tents were ranged at one end of the orchard, the officers' tents pitched all round its edge, and the different company messes installed in the open air.

For ten delightful days the Battalion spent a peaceful routine existence. The order went forth that cap-stars and buttons would be polished, and once more, at the morning inspection, our Ensign found himself, as in bygone days in barracks at home, scrutinising the men of his platoon for any signs that might betray a hasty or indifferent toilet. The Division or the Brigade

—anyhow, the authority that governs these things — decided that the village streets were unduly dirty, and the supervision of a daily scavenging party was added to the duties of the Piquet Officer. Rubbish and dirt lying about the camp were collected and burnt, the village streets were picked clear of empty Woodbine cases and sardine tins and matches and bits of newspaper, and swept and garnished, so that when the Brigade marched out of V—— it left a clean village behind.

Three times within a hundred years had the high tide of war swept across the village and the little château where The Baron and three generations of his family before him had been born. On a window-pane of his house was still to be seen the name “JULIE,” scratched with a diamond on the glass by the wife of a Cossack officer quartered at the chateau in 1812, while Europe was breathing again after the departure of The Ogre to Elba. In 1870

The Baron, while yet a lad, had seen the Prussians, most insolent of conquerors, lodging at the château; forty-four years after, in the heyday of their victorious advance, he had watched their cavalry passing through the village before the Battle of the Marne had sent them to the right-about and shattered all their hopes. Since those black August days of 1914 The Baron had seen all manner of fighting-men in and about his ancient home, *poilus* and cuirassiers and Spahis and *goumiers*, at first, and then, after a little time, the British,—English and Scots and Welsh and Irish, and Indians and Australians and Canadians and South Africans. From the windows of his château he had seen the whole flood of battle flowing down to the Somme—and he was a little shy of soldiers.

For in war, he told our Ensign over a glass of home-brewed cider, poultry goes a-missing from the farmyards, and the game vanishes from the woods, and the orchards

are bereft of fruit, and young trees unaccountably hacked down. . . . "One does not grudge it, . . . enfin, c'est la guerre!"

But when The Baron found that the newcomers did not loot his chickens or poach his rabbits or break down his trees, his heart warmed to his guests in the orchard. He sent the officers, as a present, a hamper of his delicious home-brewed cider; he plundered his kitchen-garden to supply them with vegetables at a very moderate price—*les affaires sont les affaires, n'est-ce pas?*—(and vegetables are hard to come by where the locust hosts of the Somme have passed), and he sold them his ducklings. One night he dined with the double-company Mess beneath the apple-trees in the orchard, and made himself as charming as a well-bred Frenchman can. Of the Guards he said: "*On voit bien ce sont des gens qui savent se conduire!*"

It was The Baron who told the double-company Mess of the little river in which

they enjoyed many bathes in the hot summer afternoons. It was a few miles distant, an ice-cold, crystal-clear stream with a chalky bottom, that emptied itself into a deep and surging mill-pond at the foot of a ruined mill. Our Ensign and his brother officers used to ride over after tea, and, passing by the mill-pond, where the men of the Coldstream and Grenadiers quartered in the neighbourhood used to disport themselves, would ascend the stream a little and plunge in off the grassy banks. They often had a silent spectator of these bathes — a grey-haired man who sat for hours, a dog beside him, fishing in the stream. One day they spoke to him, and discovered that he was a citizen of Lille, a *réfugié*, waiting in a quiet spot for the day of victory. Patting his dog, he used to say in his mournful way, "*Lui, aussi, est Lillois: c'est tout ce qu'il me reste de ma famille!*"

Thus the summer days went by very

pleasantly. Routine duties filled in their mornings, short route-marches to keep the men fit, parades, company drill, and, of course, daily "orders"; in the afternoons there was bathing or rides out to other Guards' battalions quartered about the place, or a concert by the Irish Guards' band, which had come out in its turn from London to spend a few weeks with the Guards' Division. One afternoon The Lad, whom our Ensign had not seen again since their rather hasty parting under shell fire, came over with one or two others from his battalion and stayed to dinner in the orchard. Our Ensign and some of the others returned this visit, and dined with the other battalion in a camp of huts in a wood, and, after a very merry dinner, wobbled perilously home on bicycles in the dark, over an execrable road.

The weather remained magnificent. Every night the majority of the officers slept outside their tents in the orchard, under a

velvety sky spangled with a vast array of stars, sometimes with the moon hung like a great lamp among the trees. The awakening in the freshness of dawn was a sheer delight, with the birds chirruping in the apple-trees, the sky benign and blue in the gentle light of the newly-risen sun, the grass which formed their *descente du lit* glittering with the morning dews. The men also, in their camp, dragged forth their packs at nightfall from the huts and lay down to sleep *à la belle étoile*.

On Sundays there was Brigade Divine Service in an orchard behind the château. On one or two occasions the band was in attendance and accompanied the old English hymns with fine effect. It was an unforgettable scene—the lines of tall, well-knit figures in khaki, bare-headed, standing on the grass in the sunshine or in the shade of the fruit trees, the Brigade Chaplain in his white surplice in the centre, close to him the little group of officers, a few patients with

bandaged heads or arms from a local casualty clearing station, a knot of wide-eyed French youngsters, and the deep tones of the men's voices blending with the solemn strains of the band.

No less impressive was the Irish Guards' Mass held on the same spot every Sunday at an earlier hour, the R.C. Chaplain to the Battalion, his leggings protruding unexpectedly below his sacerdotal vestments, celebrating at a portable altar surrounded by the kneeling figures of the big Irishmen—a wonderful and deeply impressive sight. Mass invariably concluded with an Irish hymn—

“O glorious Saint Patrick,
Dear Saint of our Isle!”

which the Irishmen used to sing with immense religious feeling and with a volume of sound that must have made the château windows tremble.

Every day came news of further successes on the Somme: every day our Ensign and

his friends discussed the Battalion's chances of an early share in the great push : every day there were fresh rumours of great tasks supposedly awaiting the Guards on the Somme ; but nothing ever came of them.

On the last day of their stay, the King, who was visiting the Army in France, came to see the Brigade, and walked into the orchard where the officers of our Ensign's Battalion were quartered and where they were waiting to be presented. The double-company Mess had ransacked the village for flowers to put on the mess-table in honour of the occasion, and had procured some beautiful La France roses which, placed in soda-water bottles, lent a nice touch of colour to the table. It was at the mess-table under the trees where they were presented to the King, so they felt that their labours had not been in vain.

The Battalion left V—— with many regrets on a dull steamy day, and marched

to a dirty fly-ridden camp in the woods of M——, where it rained mercilessly and life was squalid and drear. There they stayed for two days and a half, a wonderful night bombardment of the Hun lines by the British artillery the only diversion, and then received unexpected orders to leave. Everybody believed that the Battalion was going straight into the fight, and some of the young officers summoned the Battalion barber to their tents and got their hair cut on the strength of the rumour.

But their hour had not yet struck. The village of L—— was their next destination. Here they spent two days, and were then informed that they were going into the trenches again for a short spell. This rumour was at first received with incredulity. Nevertheless it was true.

By the following evening the Battalion was once more in the front line.

CHAPTER VI.

INSCRUTABLE appear the ways of the Staff to the young lions of our army in France. For a month the Battalion had been fondly nursing the idea of going into action, yet here they were back again in the old routine of trench warfare. True, they were on the battlefield of the Somme, though that singularly diminutive stream was away to the southward of them; but there was no sign of immediate action in their neighbourhood—the traces were all of the fighting which had been.

A modern battle is run very much on the lines of a railway time-table. The attack is entrusted to certain armies, and the corps

of which these armies are composed send their divisions and brigades "over the top" in due course and duly take them out of the line, whereupon fresh troops take their places. Each corps has its own billeting area, towns and villages and camps, where its troops are billeted on the way to or from battle. As one division or brigade moves out of one billet, the successor moves in by schedule, just as, on the railway, one train follows another on the same set of metals. This disposition of troops in a vast battle, over widely devastated country, is a very important feature of the operations; for nothing must be left to chance, and, with the tide of battle ebbing and flowing, success or failure may depend on the accessibility of the reserves.

But the hot blood of our young officers does not always comprehend these strategical considerations, and our Ensign's Battalion groused mightily at the way the

Guards were being "shunted about," while the rest of the British army were busily collecting laurels on the Somme.

The Battalion took over from some very cheery "Kitchener chaps," and the officers of the company which our Ensign's company relieved in the support position—a bowl-shaped chalk quarry with some excellent dug-outs—provided our Ensign and his brother officers with a very good luncheon. As No. 2 Company had been in the front line on the last occasion, it was now their turn to be in support, where their only duties were fetching rations and water for themselves and the companies in the front line. During their wanderings the double-company Mess had received some fresh members, including one Bryan, who went to our Ensign's company, and one Duke, who went to No. 1, —our Ensign had been friends with both men in barracks at home, and their coming in no wise disturbed but only in-

creased the *cameraderie* of the double-company Mess.

The principal duty of the Guards in these trenches, as far as the front-line companies were concerned, was to "clean up." This part of the line had been the scene of a holding attack in the earlier stages of the Somme battle. The troops concerned had done their work, but had not been able to hold the ground gained, and had fallen back to their front line, which had had a regular pounding from the German artillery. The trenches were badly battered and required a lot of repair, the dead bodies were scattered thickly about, and the atmosphere, especially in the warm showery weather then prevalent, was very bad.

So every night parties sallied forth, some to wire, others to repair the parapet, others again to bury the dead and salve the equipment lying about, both British and German. The burial parties had the

worst time: you wanted strong nerves to stomach the sights about those trenches. Our Ensign used to see the fruits of these midnight salvage enterprises laid out afterwards in the trench—pay-books and identity discs and rifles and boxes of ammunition and helmets—ready to be sent down to the Brigade. Altogether, during the few days they were in that part of the line, the Battalion buried several hundred bodies and brought in a very large amount of salvage, for which good service they subsequently received the thanks of their Brigadier.

Life was pretty quiet in those trenches. The Hun was having such a desperate struggle to keep his line together where the sledge-hammer blows were being dealt, that in the quieter spots he was only too glad to live and let live. The daily Intelligence Summary showed clearly, on the plain testimony of German army orders, letters found on the dead, and the less

reliable statements of prisoners, that not only was the invincibility of the German army exploded amongst the very men who had most sedulously spread the myth, but that the German Higher Commands were seriously concerned at the growing demoralisation of the troops, as shown by such significant symptoms as desertions, slackness in patrolling, and the like.

As a scrupulous chronicler of the adventures of our Ensign, I must not overlook a curious experience that befell him one morning in these trenches. Lured by the promise of a perfect dawn, he ventured forth before breakfast to visit the officers in the front line, foolishly omitting to take his Burberry with him. As he was walking down to have breakfast with The Beak and Bryan in the chalk quarry, he was surprised by a drenching downpour of rain. The approach to the front line was very simple — any one of four communication trenches would take you there — but, in

his haste to get home out of the wet, our Ensign took a wrong turn and presently found himself in a part of the front line which seemed unfamiliar to him.

Now, out in France, one trench looks very much like another. It was daylight, and the sentries had stood down, and in that downpour every man who was not on duty would naturally take shelter in the dug-outs. So our Ensign was not surprised to find the trench deserted, thinking that presently he would come to a sentry who would tell him where he was. He noticed rifles leaning against the fire-steps, and boxes of bombs in shelves cut in the parados, and here and there a pack or a mess-tin left outside a dug-out. In fact, the trench looked very much as most trenches do in the early morning, after the men have had their breakfast and are snatching a few hours' sleep.

In places the trench was very battered: at one point a huge gap had been blown

clean away, so that he found himself in full view of the German lines. Presently, as he hurried along, with his head down before the driving rain, he began to notice that the trench showed signs of most unusual untidiness. Picks and shovels were lying about all over the place: here a greatcoat had been trodden down into the mud, there a box of small-arms ammunition lay gaping on the ground. Then, even as he realised that the broken fire-bays were void of sentries, and that the trench was deserted, he came to a dead stop. For there, in the bottom of the trench, half a dozen yards from him, a khaki-clad figure lay face downwards in the mud.

An eerie sensation crept over our young man. He felt like the hero of that stirring tale of old Clark Russell's when he boards *The Frozen Pirate* and finds himself in the midst of an arrested life. For, after stepping gingerly over the prone figure in the mud, he came to a dug-out before which a

stretcher stood. On the stretcher lay a man with head swathed in bandages, and he was dead. So was the stretcher-bearer on the ground beside him, amid a litter of field-dressings. And there were many other dead bodies, besides these two, in that abandoned trench.

Our Ensign faced round and retraced his steps the way he had come, for he was fearful lest he should walk into the German lines if he went any farther. On his return he noticed many little signs that had escaped him in his previous haste,—remains of food spread out on tables in the silent dug-outs, old books and newspapers, sodden and mud-stained, some gum-boots lying in a pile behind the trench, a woollen waistcoat hanging on a nail in a ruined shelter; it was a desolate, uncanny place, and our Ensign was glad when he heard the sizzle of bacon and walked into a bombing-post of the Welsh Guards, who were holding the right of his Battalion, and was put on his road for home.

The Battalion came out of the line on a chilly Sunday afternoon — the approach trenches were so good that reliefs could be effected by daylight—and marched to a camp in a forest, charmingly situated on high ground outside a large village. The forest had not been touched by shell fire; only the trees had been thinned a little to make room for the huts and tents. The ground was clean, not fouled like their last sylvan camping-ground in the wood of M——, and the green moss made a soft carpet under their feet. There was a series of camps where the whole Brigade was lodged, and the black-roofed huts and the white bell-tents made a pretty picture spread out among the trees, the blue smoke from the wood fires curling up between, and vistas of forest glades on every hand.

The Brigade spent a very agreeable two days in the forest. The weather completely reformed itself. A fine warm burst set in, bringing out all the healthy, resinous odours

of the woods. The men exulted in their surroundings—a wholesome change, in truth, from their long nights burying the dead in the rain. When their day's work was done, they sat about in groups on the mossy ground under the trees and smoked and yarned. And (tell it not in Gath!) they sometimes contrived to have rabbit for supper.

There were a lot of Guards in and about the forest. Our Ensign, route-marching with the company, used to meet them on the road. Such encounters generally started the men on anecdotes and reminiscences of the old 4th (Guards') Brigade, extending back to the days of the Retreat from Mons. In conversation with each other the men always referred to the Guards by their different nicknames, most Guards' battalions having a sobriquet of some sort. Thus the Coldstream are "the Coalies," the Scots Guards, "the Jocks," and the Irish Guards, "the Micks."

Every morning the drums of the different Guards' battalions in the camps roused the echoes of the forest (and everybody generally) with the stirring strains of the *Grand Réveille*: every evening at Retreat, in the dying sunshine, they made the woods resound to their music until that pause came, bringing every man instinctively and by anticipation to his feet, after which the fifes squealed and the drums rolled out the National Anthem.

The company messes, which were all lodged in one long hut, had a great dinner to celebrate their coming out of the Line. Ah! those first dinners when the Battalion comes out of the trenches! Will the future—that dim “After the War,” which is the great European query-mark to-day—ever see their like? I doubt it.

How mind and body exult when you have had a hot bath, and there is the cool caress of fresh linen next your skin, and you have cast off your soiled uniform and heavy boots

and changed into another jacket and comfortable trousers and shoes, and the port has come from Christopher's, and the mess-sergeant has procured a melon! The past is shoved behind you, with its blood and mud and evil odours; the present is all high spirits and grateful relaxation; and as for the future, you give it not a thought. Yet the future was there, though the Guards in their forest camp did not realise it—somewhere out there beneath that patch of starry sky framed in the low mess door, somewhere in the Unknown where the guns throbbed faintly in the night.

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Their next halting-place in their wanderings was no less pleasant—a large comfortable village which had almost escaped the flow of humanity towards the Somme. The barns where the men were billeted were spacious and clean and dry; milk and butter and eggs and vegetables were obtainable in plenty; and there were beds for all

the officers. The whole Brigade was billeted in the village, and made its entry down a long slope leading to the main street, with drums beating at the head of each long column of dusty, sun-browned men—a brave show.

Peter and our Ensign had a knotty point of military law to settle with respect to their billet. Is an *estaminet consigné à la troupe*—that is to say, put out of bounds for troops by the Assistant Provost-Marshal for some contravention of the regulations—likewise out of bounds as a billet for officers? For they were not using the *estaminet* part of the establishment—they were merely to sleep in a bedroom above it.

Madam and a mild-mannered old gentleman, who turned out to be her husband, together with three or four peasants, seized upon this tortuous point of law, when Madam very frankly stated her case to the two officers and debated it ardently.

“*Ce sont les artilleurs,*” Madam sighed, “*qui sont venus comme ça boire de la bière à la porte du derrière . . . on est seule, n'est-ce pas ? On ne fait pas attention, n'est-ce pas ? Et puis voilà, le Prévôt-Maréchal qui vous consigne pour quinze jours ! Mon Dieu, c'est dur !*”

The husband echoed—

“*Sapristi, c'est dur !*”

And the peasants, removing their pipes to spit, chanted in chorus—

“*Bien sûr que c'est dur !*”

The upshot of it was that Peter and our Ensign, deciding that the bedroom was not the estaminet within the meaning of the Act, passed a very comfortable night on good beds in Madam's exceptionally clean room. They likewise purchased for a five-franc note two very plump white and grey lop-eared rabbits, which the *patron* carried grimly into a back-yard and brought back neatly and expeditiously slain. The mess

waiter fetched them across to the mess, and they formed the *pièce de résistance* at dinner that evening.

When troops arrive in a village out at the Front they swamp it : they make it their own. Within an hour or two of the Guards' arrival in this comfortable French hamlet, neat little boards or flags hung outside the different billets, clearly indicating who lodged there, the Headquarters and billet guards were mounted, and, with their clothes brushed and their faces shining with the recent vigorous application of yellow soap and water, the men strolled out in groups to see what refreshment local establishments could offer, and also to buy those sentimental picture post-cards in which all soldiers delight.

The main street simply overflowed with troops, big and brown and tranquil ; and for an officer to pass along was to run the gauntlet of a never-ceasing fire of salutes.

That evening Operation Orders announced that on the following morning the Battalion would march on. And our Ensign found himself entrusted with the duties of Billeting Officer

CHAPTER VII.

JUST contemplate the Billeting Officer's parlous position. The briefest period of grace is conceded to him, in which he and his accomplices cycle furiously ahead of the Battalion to distribute the billets in the area allotted to them. Even as the Billeting Officer, dusty and damp-browed, receives, on arriving at his destination, from the Staff Captain of the Brigade, the list of billets set apart for his Battalion, he can hear, with the ears of his mind, the Battalion marching towards him with the leaden feet of inexorable destiny. Every minute brings them nearer; every minute shortens that brief breathing space in which he must complete all his

arrangements and present himself, calm and unruffled, with a complete map of the locality in his mind, at the entrance of the village, to lead the incoming troops to their quarters.

The Billeting Officer must combine the organising genius of a William Whiteley with the quickness of decision of a Napoleon. He must be gentle as the dove, cunning as the serpent. He must be all things to all men—firm with recalcitrant peasants, persuasive with fussy beldames, glib with weary and fractious officers who look for beds when there are no beds.

The Billeting Officer must be an optimist, unfailing and uncompromising. He must survey the world through the rosy spectacles of the house agent. As in the house advertisements in the newspapers, so to him all residences must be “stately” or “well-appointed,” all villas “pretty” or “charming,” all rooms “lofty,” all barns “spacious.”

He and every man of his Billeting Party are cold and calculating egoists. The four

Quartermaster-Sergeants of the Battalion who accompany him are, each and individually, solely concerned with securing the best billet for their own companies. The Pioneer Sergeant has come forth to seek the largest and roomiest barn in sight for the housing of the Quartermaster's stores; the Drill-Sergeant is heart and soul devoted to the interests of the Orderly Room, the Guard Room, the Medical Inspection Room, and quarters for the signallers and the Drums; as for the poor Billeting Officer, tossed to and fro like a shuttlecock between all these conflicting currents, his dominant idea is to find some kind of decent billet for the Commanding Officer and Headquarters. Nor must he ever lose sight of the fact that, if he gives the officers of his own company anything like good quarters, he will unload upon his own devoted head all the lightnings of the other company messes.

The Billeting Party, headed by our Ensign, set off on bicycles on a delicious summer

morning for the village of F——, the next half of the Brigade, on what some one called its "one night stands" about the country. The faithful Johnson had procured for his "master" from the Signalling Sergeant a bicycle, which, in consideration of a little cleaning and oiling, ran somewhat better than army machines generally do. On the road they fell in with billeting parties from the other battalions of the Brigade, and on the face of each Billeting Officer dull care had graven a deep furrow.

Outside the church of F——, an ugly bogus Gothic structure, red and staring, like the picture on a child's box of bricks, the Staff Captain met them by appointment, and handed each Billeting Officer a list setting forth the numbers of the different billets at the disposal of the Battalion. Every house in the war zone in France bears a number stencilled on the door, and underneath, an entirely fabulous

computation of the numbers of "Hommes" or "Chevaux" that can be lodged there.

Billeting at F—— was unusually easy. The barns were large and in good repair, and the local inhabitants, while somewhat resigned, were friendly. The four companies were allotted billets without difficulty, and even the Drill-Sergeant found quarters for all his different charges. But accommodation for the officers was a different matter. Our Ensign found lodgings for the four company commanders, *tant bien que mal*; the Interpreter, who was of the party, arranged with the local curé to put up the Chaplain; and our Ensign kept in his mind's eye a certain *coquet* little red-brick villa, marked down on his list as affording accommodation for five officers, for the Headquarters billet.

But at the very door of the villa disaster was lurking. Two dragoon officers met them in the garden.

"Is this billet free?" asked our Ensign with fear in his heart.

"No," said one of the dragoons promptly; "there are five of us in here—Corps cavalry—been here for weeks."

"But it's down on my list as our billet," objected our Ensign.

"I know," was the calm reply; "we've had about six fellows before you after it—I've told the Mayor to scratch it off!"

Our Ensign looked at the list again. Then he saw a tiny smudge, which on closer investigation proved to be an asterisk. "Probably occupied" was the note he read at the foot of the page.

The list was exhausted—none of the rooms they had seen would do for Headquarters; so our Ensign, with the optimism of the Billeting Officer nascent in his breast, started to look for a clean bivouac where Headquarters might be accommodated in tents. They presently found a large grassy orchard which seemed suitable for the pur-

pose. It lay behind a farm, where our Ensign duly demanded the requisite permission.

An extremely dirty, red-eyed old woman was the *propriétaire*. She had a large, bare, and very dilapidated room, swarming with flies, which she offered; but she resolutely set her face against letting the orchard be used.

She wagged her old head stubbornly.

"*Non, non, non!*" she croaked, "*j'n'veux pas! La dernière fois les soldats ont joué au ballon dans le verger . . . ils ont tout abimé . . . j'n'veux pas!*"

Our Ensign explained with much persuasiveness, but with a horrid fear in his mind that the Battalion would arrive any instant, that only officers would be lodged there who never played football, and who, by their very presence, would prevent the irruption of *ballon-kicking* soldiery.

Then the Interpreter took a hand and drew a superb word-picture of the innate

courtliness and good behaviour of every British officer—of these officers in particular—and of the Commanding Officer most of all.

The old harridan began to yield.

“*Mais, bien sûr,*” she muttered irresolutely, “*ils vont casser mes arbres. . .*”

The Interpreter spoke again. These officers were rich and generous. They would do no damage, but any damage they might do would be paid for: of that she might rest assured. The officers would buy her chickens, her butter, her eggs: the noble young man at his side was even at that moment ready to invest five francs in the produce of the farm (this on a whispered suggestion from our Ensign). She would be reasonable; she would not regret it.

Then, at last, the old lady gave way.

“*Je veux bien, alors,*” she said, “*pourvu qu'on ne va pas jouer au ballon!*”

Thus it was settled, the double-company mess was installed in the old lady's room

in consideration of a *douceur* of 2 francs 50 a day, and our Ensign rushed away to the entrance of the village to await the coming of the Brigade.

The Brigade arrived with its usual punctuality in a cloud of dust behind the Drums, each Battalion being taken charge of by its Billeting Officer as it marched in, the quartermaster-sergeants leading the different companies into their billets. The men swarmed into the farmyards and dumped their packs and rifles in the barns, then lined up in the yards of their billets for the customary foot inspection—in bare feet, their boots and socks in their hands. The cooks, all smoking, with their begrimed attendants trudging behind, lumbered into the billets, the little billet-boards appeared outside gateways and doors, the guards were mounted, and then the officers, dusty and hot, came streaming into the messes where the mess servants, surrounded by dogs and cats and poultry and small

children, were unpacking the mess-boxes and getting lunch.

Our Ensign walked up to the Mess to receive congratulations on the success of his arrangements. He was given a chilly reception.

"I suppose we have the worst mess in the place," said Roderick gloomily; "the cobbler's children are always the worst shod, and the Billeting Officer's mess always gets the rottenest accommodation!"

"I can't imagine," said El Capitan, one of the company commanders, "why you put me to sleep next door to X. I have to go through his room to get to mine, and you know how he hates being disturbed!"

"I suppose you've arranged for tents," said somebody else darkly; "of course the simple life is very healthy and all that, but there's the devil of a storm blowing up, and what sleeping out in the open in your beautiful orchard to-night will be like, the Lord only knows!"

Then the mess waiter, entering, informed our Ensign that there were no potatoes: could he get some anywhere? That Madame would not allow the cook to make a fire in the courtyard: would he speak to her? That they had sent up word from the medical inspection room to know whether the Heavies were entitled to be in the same billet: would the Billeting Officer mind stepping across there and seeing about it?

Our Ensign put down his drink untasted, and holding his head in his hands, staggered out into the hot sunshine. In the street he met an ensign of one of the other companies, dusty, doleful, and dejected.

"Got a good mess?" he asked our Ensign.

Our young man assumed an air of Christian resignation.

"Nobody could have a worse mess than we've got," continued the other, and added pointedly, "*but, of course, you're all right!*"

Our Ensign laughed bitterly and went his way. Black is the lot of the Billeting Officer.

But when he returned to his mess the soothing influence of luncheon had worked wonders. The gramophone was playing, and the mess beamed at its late victim over its coffee and cigarettes. The sun was shining brightly out of the blue sky; the tents were being pitched in the orchard; altogether life had assumed a fairer hue. The gust had passed. And our Ensign, eating his lunch, reflected that campaigning is, after all, but a series of gusts: a gust of pleasant days, a gust of bad ones; a gust of easy times, a gust of unfortunate incidents and "strafeing," when everything seems to go wrong; a gust of peaceful wanderings like the present, and then a gust of war, of stern reality, the gust to come.

That afternoon some of them took horses and rode across to visit the adjacent

“Grottoes,” which, according to the Interpreter, were the principal attraction in the way of sight-seeing in that part of the country. In the village outside which the Grottoes were situated, our Ensign came across The Lad, whose Battalion was billeted in the place. The Lad, with a party of his brother officers, was, to our Ensign’s intense delight, engaged in heated controversy with his Billeting Officer. As few things are harder to bear than the annoyance of a good example, so is nothing more consoling to the victim of injustice than to see his fellow in the same pass.

The Grottoes consisted of a series of high-roofed caves and narrow galleries cut out of the soft chalk, and running far into the bowels of the earth. To the archæologist or geologist they would doubtless have proved of enthralling interest, for the old gentleman who had made their exploration his life work had filled case upon case with those chipped and dusty frag-

ments of flint in which the scientific mind rejoices. To our Ensign and his companions the main interest of the Grottoes consisted in the fact that they were beautifully cool, and also that the Germans were known to have made good use of similar caves in such fortified villages as Beaumont Hamel and Les Bœufs.

The young French girl who showed them round by the light of a candle informed them, with all the glib fluency of the professional guide, that in feudal times the Grottoes had been quarries in which the serfs quarried the chalk for local lordlings, and that at different periods of history the caves had afforded refuge to various bands of brigands, including some jolly fellows rejoicing in the name of the Flayers of the North. Refugees had found sanctuary there in the French Revolution, and at the time of the Prussian invasion of 1870 the civil population had likewise made the caves their hiding-place.

"The Grottoes extend for two kilometres," wound up the young French lady; "one franc is the charge for the whole trip: fifty centimes for the shorter journey."

"How far did she say?" asked one of the visitors.

"Two kilometres," replied our Ensign.

"Tell her we'll give her a franc and take the short trip," came back the reply . . . and Science hid her head. . . . "I want my tea!"

As they paid the girl at the entrance, before going away, our Ensign asked her if she were the regular guide.

"*Avant la guerre,*" she answered, "*c'était mon père qui faisait le guide. Mais lui et mes deux frères sont partis pour l'armée et depuis, il n'y a que moi et ma sœur qui restent!*"

"Are they all right, your father and brothers?" somebody asked.

"Papa est tombé à Verdun," she replied ;
"un de mes frères est prisonnier en Alle-
magne : l'autre est encore là-bas, au front !"
And she wiped her eyes.

You can't move far in France to-day without stepping into the shadow of the people's mourning.

Then they went back into the blinding sunshine, and, mounting their horses, clattered back to F——. At the horse-lines, where they left their horses, they learnt that "Retreat" was to be played in the main street of the village by the massed Drums of the Brigade. So they all strolled off to the main street and found retreat in full swing.

It was a good show. The broad street running between the long, low, white farm-houses, with big gateways opening into the square courtyards, was thronged with men from the different battalions of the Brigade. Tall and sunburnt and well brushed, with

their cap-stars and buttons well burnished, they lined the sides of the street, leaving the centre of the road free for the passage of the Drums.

In F—— was quartered a labour company of Senegalese, extraordinary nightmare objects, loose-limbed, lanky negroes, with coal-black faces seamed with tribal cuts, grinning from beneath high yellow tarbooshes, round the edge of which their thick woolly hair was fuzzed out, huge pouting lips, and a highly comic attire consisting of voluminous jebbahs of coarse canvas, snowy white, reaching below the knee, baggy white trousers, and heavy marching boots. Parties of these weird-looking creatures were now scattered about among the thick lines of Guardsmen, jolly as only negroes can be at the sound of music, grinning with a white flash of teeth, and chattering volubly in their African lingo. They were an extraordinary com-

pany, and their morning parade with picks and shovels, before going out to work on the roads, was the most excruciatingly funny thing a man ever saw.

Down the centre alley, between the lines of men, came the Drums, four drum-majors with their staffs in front. Behind them came the side-drums, the drummers' hands raised high and falling together, the tenor drums, the fifes and the brass drums. On reaching the top or the bottom of the street, as the case might be, the leading files turned and marched through the succeeding files, each rank following suit.

It was a great moment for the Drums. The whole Brigade was in the street, from the Brigadier downwards: every eye was on the Drums, and the Drums bore themselves right gallantly. They crashed through all the well-known marches, to which the Brigade had trudged many a weary mile in France, and then came the

crowning moment, the march based on the regimental airs of the Brigade of Guards.

One after the other the old familiar tunes rang out, amid a roll of drums that made the very windows rattle, — “The British Grenadiers,” of the Grenadiers; “Milanello,” that quaint, jingling march which the Coldstream picked up in Spain, and of which tradition says the original Spanish words are unprintable; the Scots Guards’ “Highland Laddie,” the frankly joyous “St Patrick’s Day” of the Irish Guards, and the sonorous “Men of Harlech” of the Welsh Guards.

After the fantasia had ended in an abrupt crash, the Senior Drum-Major marched stiffly across the street to the Brigadier, and, saluting, asked for permission to dismiss. Then every officer’s right hand went to his cap and every man stiffened to attention as the Drums played “God Save the King,”

the tones of which, both on land and sea, announce to the fighting forces the coming of night.

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The next day the Brigade moved on again.

CHAPTER VIII.

TAKE a large French village, shell it a little and bomb it a little from aeroplanes so that all the windows are broken and most of the roofs damaged, remove the civilian inhabitants, pass several hundred thousand troops through it, plant horse-lines all round it, so that every road approaching it is churned into a morass by the horses' hoofs, make the road running through it one of the main arteries leading into battle, and choke it—day and night—with marching troops and motor ambulances and long strings of lorries, smear it alternately with layers of dust and mud, add several billion flies—horse-, house-, and bluebottle—pop in a hundred thousand

rats or so, bring back a few score civilians to take possession of the only whole houses remaining, and serve hot—extremely hot—and stinking. And there you have the village of M——, the Brigade's next halting-place, as it presented itself to our Ensign and his billeting party about the hour of noon on a blazing hot day.

Behind them they had a twenty-mile cycle ride, under a fierce sun, against a violent and exhausting head-wind. And now, soaked to the skin with perspiration, covered with dust, thirsty, tired, and (to speak for our Ensign only) extremely cross, they pushed their heavy machines up the long slope of the main street amid a dense mass of traffic and clouds of petrol-scented dust.

They were early for their rendezvous with the Staff Captain: in fact, they had more than half an hour to spare. They stacked their bicycles together outside the Town Major's office, which was to be their

trysting-place, and forthwith went their several ways in search of shade and refreshment, to meet again at the appointed time. Our Ensign was carried off by a billeting Coldstream officer to a Y.M.C.A. establishment, where, among more flies than our Ensign had ever seen together before, they quaffed some cold, green liquid, retailed at a penny a glass as lemonade by a bespectacled Hebe (*masculini generis*) behind the cake-laden counter. Our Ensign and his brother officer absorbed several glasses of this refreshing beverage, and then went forth to find the Town Major.

He was sitting in his office, a large, clean-shaven major of infantry, urbane and charming. He mopped his brow, and sighed when he saw them enter.

"Oh dear!" he groaned, "you keep on coming in, and I haven't the least idea where you are all to go. I do hope you're not expecting anything great in the way of billets: you'll not get 'em here.

Half the place is in ruins, AND the dirt! AND the smells! You never saw anything like it! Oh, damn these flies!"

He whisked his handkerchief round his head.

"Well," he continued, "I think there's some Perrier left: I believe I got the last case in this part of the country: and I expect there will be some whisky, too. Come along into the garden: the rest are there!"

His frankness boded ill: like Billeting Officers, Town Majors are generally optimists, and chatter gaily about the "unexceptional advantages" of the billets in their domain. The two officers followed their host in silence into the garden, where they found the other Billeting Officers of the Brigade, in various stages of exhaustion, conversing in gloomy tones over the Town Major's whisky and Perrier.

The garden was a dirty backyard contrived so as to collect all the sun's rays

as in a burning - glass. It commanded a view of a flat green field in which the principal object was an abandoned incinerator.

In due time the Staff Captain appeared and distributed the billeting lists. He, too, was brutally frank about the accommodation: they had best expect nothing, he told them. Our Ensign found allocated to his battalion a short patch of houses in the main street, opposite and on either side of the Town Major's office. The list looked promising enough: several billets were marked down as furnishing accommodation for as many as a hundred men at a time: one even—as shown on the list—would take two hundred. But as soon trust a company prospectus as a billeting list; the element of truth is about the same in both.

It was a quarter to one when our Ensign started his round of the billets. The billeting parties had come across country on their

bicycles; the Brigade was going to cover part of the journey by rail and march the rest; they were not expected to arrive before three o'clock at the earliest, so our Ensign felt that he could take things fairly easily.

The peasants were not friendly — and why should they be, poor creatures? — returning, with the French peasant's fatalistic attachment to his native soil, to find their houses wrecked, their gardens ravaged, and their barns and sheds occupied by an ever-changing succession of foreign soldiers. They came to their house doors and pointed silently to the barns and outhouses about the yard, then shut the door in our young man's face.

Things went all right at first. Everything was filthy and swarming with flies, everywhere the ground was befouled, and in many of the once trim gardens, amid the full-blown roses and the straggling and broken lines of peas and scarlet runners,

water-logged and evil-smelling dug-outs were crumbling into oblivion—mementoes of the days when the German artillery was close enough up to shell the French troops in their billets. But our Ensign managed to get billets for three out of the four companies, though most of the places had holes both in the roof and in the wattle walls. He intended to put the remaining company in the billet noted as accommodating 200 men.

This was where the billeting list let him down badly—an act of base betrayal. For the farmer came out of his house at the officer's summons and announced, politely enough but with great firmness, that the *granges* were no longer available, for the harvest, which was to be brought in that afternoon, would fill them to the rafters.

Here was a staggering blow indeed. The whole Battalion was provided for except the officers; and now, unless the Town Major could allot them another billet, the whole

billeting scheme would have to be rearranged and a quart crammed into a pint pot—that is to say, a thousand men packed into billets for 750.

Back to the Town Major's office our young man went. It was already half-past two; neither Headquarters nor the messes nor the officers had yet been provided for. The Town Major was out. He had been carried off by the Brigade Medical Officer, who was clamouring for a site for the field ambulance. Sending one of his party to watch the entrance of the village in case the Brigade should appear before its time, our Ensign set off feverishly on the track of the Town Major.

It was three o'clock by the time that our young man had found him. There was no sign of the Brigade as yet. Heedless of the clamouring throng of petitioners at the Town Major's heels, our Ensign resolutely button-holed him and poured his pathetic story into his sympathetic ear.

Our young man's desperate situation stirred the generous heart of that Town Major.

"The harvest again!" he groaned, clasping his brow. "I'll go and see what I can do with the fellow, but I fear we are undone!" As they hurried up the street, he explained to our Ensign that, by virtue of some dark arrangement between the British and French authorities, the peasants had the right to claim exemption from billeting to make room for the crops.

The Town Major's fears were justified: the farmer was in the right; his position was incontestably sound; they would have to forego the billet.

Together, the Major and our Ensign inspected two other billets — "emergency billets" the Town Major called them, the last two in the place. One was occupied by an artillery store, but they contrived to filch from the gunners accommodation for one platoon; the other was a gaunt barn, open

all along one side, with shell-holes in the further wall, and the corrugated iron roof abundantly perforated by shrapnel.

Our Ensign shook his head, thanked the Town Major, and fled. The whole billeting scheme had to be rearranged. He picked up his billeting party once more and started the round again, reshuffling the billets, redistributing the men, cramming in half a platoon here and tucking little packets of men away in there, deaf to expostulation and entreaty, coldly ignoring the dismay in the faces of his quartermaster-sergeants.

Half-past three! No Brigade yet: now for the officers . . . two or three in this empty room, with sacking stretched in front of the paneless windows, and the mess across the entrance-hall in a dirty apartment, where fat bluebottles hovered greedily about decaying fragments of bully beef; this silent and forbidding house, to which they obtained access through a window, with three filthy little rooms, would accommodate six

or seven officers—say, the members of the double-company mess: some tents could be put up in the garden at the back; another mess here, the company commanders there . . . but where, oh where, to put Headquarters?

There was nothing suitable under a roof, but our Ensign remembered the field with the incinerator behind the Town Major's garden. Four o'clock: not a drum to be heard: the Brigade was late: back to the office to obtain from the ever-patient Major a lien on the field. Done! and three tents promised into the bargain in case it rained that night and the billets leaked.

It had already started to rain when our Ensign, his appointed task over, hastened down the village street to the cross-roads by the river by which the Brigade would come in.

There he found his fellow-billeters in the Brigade, each with his tale of dirty billets and leaky roofs and swarming flies, each

with his story of the treachery of billeting lists, for the harvest surprise, our Ensign found, had been sprung on them all.

They waited patiently in the rain for hours. The traffic never ceased to pour into the village in a double stream, going in both directions to and from the battlefield, troops and guns and transport and ambulances and motor-cars. A red-capped sergeant of military police stood on point duty at the cross-roads, immutably calm and affable amid the confusion and the din; eternally side-tracking strings of horses, which were not allowed through the village, and which persevering grooms, well knowing the prohibition, hoped yet to be able to get through, patiently answering inquiries from dust-powdered lorry-drivers who had lost their way.

The shades of evening deepened gently amid a depressing drizzle, but still the Brigade did not come, still the traffic flowed past without a moment's break.

"It looks as if the Brigade were not going

to arrive until after dark!" said one of the Billeting Officers; "and in this squash there'll be the most holy confusion—the Lord help us!"

A Grenadier subaltern, who had discovered a wayside café just past the cross-roads, led some of them to it. None of them had had anything more substantial than a sandwich since breakfast, and they demanded food. All that Madame could produce was a box of wafers, very sweet and sickly, which they ate with some excellent coffee which Madame prepared over the stove.

Outside night fell, muggy and wet. Then the Brigade transport, which had come by road, arrived, a long train of rumbling limbers, with the Transport Officers on horseback. They had no news of the Brigade, but a little later a staff car, which the Billeting Officers stopped, reported that it had passed "some Guards or other" on the road about two miles back.

And then at last they came . . . at eight o'clock. The dark and the traffic notwithstanding, the Guards made their entry to the tap of drum, and, despite all forebodings, each battalion got safely tucked away in its billets. When he reached the mess our Ensign found that his brother officers had so many remarks to offer on the slowness of the train that had conveyed them, and the general inefficiency of railway transport in particular, that they altogether omitted to comment on the nature of the billets which he offered them.

Though the sleeping quarters were indescribably bad, the actual mess-room proved to be better than might have been expected. It was a room in a small farmhouse occupied by a Frenchwoman, whose husband was in the trenches, and who, after the gifted Apollo had talked to her a little in his most Parisian French, proffered her services as cook. And so, while the traffic rumbled, and the rain splashed down outside, they

made a good dinner, and eventually repaired to their squalid lodging in excellent spirits. There they found their sleeping-valises spread on the dusty floor, and there they laid them down to sleep, promising to turn every available servant on to swabbing in the morning.

M—— proved itself to be every bit as bad as it had promised. The billets were positively filthy, and for days the battalions of the Brigade swept and garnished and burnt, filling in the rubbish pits which gaped, stinking, in every garden, and leaving a trail of chloride of lime behind them wherever they went. Fly-papers and fly-swatters proved illusive against the indomitable breeding energy of the flies, and only days of unremitting hard work contrived at length to abate this very disagreeable and very unhygienic pest.

It rained for days on end. In a few hours the deep dust of the road turned first to a thick morass of mud, and then

into a liquid lake of slime which flowed across the gutters to the very gateways of the billets. To avoid wading in mud up to the ankles, the men built little causeways to bridge the gutters, using the bricks from the more dilapidated houses, and laying branches on top. Nearly all the billets leaked, and the yards, filthy as they always are abroad with a vast and sodden midden-heap in the centre, were ankle-deep in slush. What was possible to do with tarpaulin to stop the gaps in roofs and walls was done, but while the rain lasted the men had a very thin time, which they bore, as all men do in France, without grouching, reserving their grumbling for superficial and insignificant details, as is the way of the British soldier.

The billets were so bad and the weather continued to be so wet that a rum issue was ordered, though the season of the daily rum issues had not yet arrived. An officer superintended the issue of rum to each

company, for the regulation is that each man must drink his tot on the spot where it is issued, in the presence of an officer—this to prevent hoarding and its attendant evils.

Accordingly, our Ensign found himself one wet evening attending the issue of rum to the company. On the floor of the barn stood a lighted candle, the centre of a number of mess-tins representing the portions of the different groups in the company. At our Ensign's side was the Company Sergeant-Major with the rum-jars. Silent and expectant, the men stood all around and in the yard without.

The Company Sergeant-Major poured the rum out into the different tins, announcing as he did so the name of the recipients—"No. 5 Platoon," "The Cooks," "The Pioneers," and so on. Then, after much shuffling about in the outer darkness, the men got formed up, mess-tin in hand; but before the first received his noggin, the Company Sergeant-Major put to our Ensign that

time-honoured question, "Would he try a little drop?"

Rum on an empty stomach before dinner is not to be recommended, but our young man knew what was expected of him, and with suitable gratitude accepted the offer. About a mugful of raw spirit was there-upon poured out for him, greatly to his dismay, but he picked it up, and crying "Here's luck!" drained it. The rum burnt his throat and brought the tears to his eyes, but he finished off the portion and held the mug upside down, as the men do, to show that it was empty—all this amid profound silence, with every man's eye upon him. Then, one by one, the men emerged out of the gloom into the yellow circle of light, with outstretched tin or mug, received their portion, tossed it off, inverted their drinking vessel, and moved away, wiping their mouths on the backs of their hands. When every man had been served, the Company Sergeant-Major picked up the

last tin, and, tipping it down for the officer to see the contents, said—

“For the sergeants and myself.”

This last portion was divided between them and consumed. Then the C.S.M., shaking the rum jar, said—

“There’s some left yet, sir.”

“Everybody had his tot?” asked our Ensign.

“Yes, sir,” was the reply.

“Right,” answered the officer; “tip the rest out!”

(For such is the inexorable rule of the Army: what is left over from a rum issue must be spilled. Rum does not keep.)

“Sir!” replied the C.S.M., and in obedience to the order he emptied a brown gush of the spirit upon the earthen floor under the sorrowful gaze of the men. Our Ensign would have gladly given them an extra tot all round, for the night was raw and chill, but an order is an order. . . .

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And now the Guards found themselves within measurable distance of the ultimate goal of all their wanderings, the Battle of the Somme. Day and night the little village street resounded to the tramp of marching columns, to the thunder of the jarring, quivering trains of ammunition lorries. In that cramped and crowded village the only parade-ground was the dirty courtyards of the different billets, where the most stentorian word of command would often be lost in the roar of traffic from the street.

But while the stream of men and munitions flowed unceasingly eastward towards the Somme, from the battlefield came daily reports of further successes. Every sign pointed to the imminent participation of the Guards in the great offensive. There were frequent conferences, and, day after day, the Guards marched out by platoons, by companies, by battalions, past the little military cemetery, past the vast camps stretching away to the horizon, past the

gangs of grubby German prisoners working on the roads, to the training-ground, where the coming attack was rehearsed in every detail. There were field - days and night operations and lectures and several false alarms, . . . warnings to be in readiness for immediate departure, which were afterwards cancelled.

A few days after the arrival of the Brigade at M——, the Guards' Divisional Canteen turned up and installed itself in the main street, and was followed shortly afterwards by the Guards' Divisional Cinema, which was set up in that very barn with shrapnel-riddled roof which our Ensign had rejected as a billet. Tarpaulin supplied the missing wall, a little gas-engine furnished the power, and on the many wet evenings that the Clerk of the Weather bestowed on the Guards at M——, "the pictures" proved a great attraction. There, on one of the rare fine afternoons, our Ensign and a large party of his friends sat in a stifling atmosphere and

saw the Somme battle film. Save for a few gunners and sappers, the whole audience consisted of Guardsmen, and their comments on this celebrated series of pictures were instructive—for they made none. They only cheered and laughed every time “Fritz” was seen on the screen.

The Guards’ Divisional Baths—a travelling concern this, that plants itself in any empty building that seems adapted to the purpose, or, in default of such a building, erects its own premises—happened along with its array of tubs and heating apparatus and vast supplies of towels and clean shirts, socks, and underwear. Every day parties of men were marched down by an officer under a scheme that ensured to every man one bath a week.

There was much entertaining between the different Messes. Everybody was always dining out with one or other of the company Messes in the different battalions, with the Brigade machine-gunners, or with the

Stokes Mortars, who are charming fellows, but whose propinquity in the trenches is unpopular owing to the disagreeable tendency of their murderous weapons to draw fire.

In the double-company Mess all went as merry as a wedding bell. Madame, in whose house the Mess was lodged, proved herself a jewel and cooked them wonderful omelettes and ragouts, and a *Potage Bonne Femme* before which Escoffier himself would have doffed his hat. The Mess raged and wrangled and argued, as young men do the world over, but the underlying good fellowship was never disturbed. The past tense is ever a kindlier critic than the present, but our Ensign, looking back on those pleasant summer days, cannot recollect that there was a single discordant element in that little band of men.

But the sand in the hour-glass had all but run out. At last the word for their departure came. And Battalion Orders that

evening closed with a significant paragraph. Under the heading DRESS, it ran—

“The polishing of buttons and cap-stars is discontinued until further orders.”

A bon entendeur, salut !

CHAPTER IX.

FROM now on, the shadows of the events that stood before began to be more sharply defined. As the Brigade marched out of M—— behind the Drums on a dull grey morning, there were many besides our Ensign there who felt that the moment was close at hand when they would take their places in the battle-line of the Somme. Indeed, hardly had the men got shaken down in their new quarters—a bivouac on a bare and dirty hillside amidst rolling downs covered, as far as the eye could see, with camps and horse-lines and abandoned trenches,—than a message arrived—

“The Battalion is on ten minutes’ notice!”

Now they were on the very fringe of the fight. The bivouac was within the zone of "the heavies." All that day, with a blinding flash of green flame, a sickly burst of yellow smoke, and a ponderous roar, the big guns gave tongue from their positions among the downs. All that day, down the white road running through the ruined village on the fringe of the bivouac, snorted and rattled and tramped the vast outgoing traffic of the battlefield. Motor ambulances whirred by in a constant stream, slowing up at the end of the village, where in cavernous dug-outs white-robed surgeons toiled over the human *débris* of the fight. Motor-lorries fetching shells, ammunition limbers and water-carts going down to be filled, baggage carts—all through the morning and afternoon our Ensign saw them bumping slowly down the hill in the dust.

Between the gaps in the traffic, marching in a dense white haze, came the remnants of the battalions which had just written Ginchy

in letters of blood upon their colours. Our Ensign had seen that splendid Irish Division marching into action less than a week before, with pipes skirling out the old Irish airs and green flags waving, a jaunty, defiant, deathless band. Not a whit less jaunty, not a whit less defiant, though the Reaper had been busy in their ranks, our Ensign saw them again to-day, slow-footed and mud-stained, dirty and unshaven, yet marching with the gait of victors.

Somewhere down the road the cry rang out—

“’Tis the Dubs.!”

In an instant the road was overflowing with Irish Guardsmen, swarming forward in the dust-clouds raised by the Dublin Fusiliers in their passage.

“Jasus! ’tis the Micks!” rang out a voice in the midst of the column.

Cheery salutations were exchanged. Here and there a brown hand stretched out from the roadside grasped a muddy one thrust

forward from the ranks of marching men in a warm clasp. Chaff was freely bandied about as the Irishmen trudged past, "Dubs." and Munsters and Connaughts and the rest.

"So they didn't get yez this time, Micky, me boy!" shouted a droll Irish voice from the roadside.

"True for you, Patsy, true for you!" flashed back the answer from the ranks. "I'll be meetin' yez in Ould Dublin yet!"

"Begob! ye'll have to get a move on yez, the Micks," drawled out a rich brogue from the road, "if ye want to find anny of the Gerboys left! We didn't lave manny of thim for yez! Didn't we an' the Dubs. knock hell's own blazes out of thim?"

There was a roar of laughter and cheers, then brogue and its owner were swallowed up in the dust. . . .

At tea that afternoon somebody announced that the Welsh Guards up in the front line had had a very bad shelling, and were probably coming out that night. An-

other battalion was to take their places, and two companies of our Ensign's battalion were to go up and replace this battalion in support. After tea our Ensign was sent for by the Commanding Officer, and told to go on ahead and reconnoitre the route for the two companies as far as the Headquarters of another Guards' Brigade, so that they should not lose their way in the dark. From Brigade Headquarters guides would take the two companies up to the line.

It was getting dusk, and there was no time to lose. Our Ensign sent his servant to the Signallers to borrow two bicycles; and after beating the bivouac for his orderly, and failing to find him, he selected a bright lad in the company to act as orderly, and a little later the pair might have been seen pushing their bicycles through the dust up the steep road leading towards the Front.

The experiences of that night lingered long in our Ensign's memory. The road

was terribly rough; and though, with the coming of evening, the traffic was less, there was still enough about to make riding in the half-light distinctly dangerous. Their way led them past miles of empty trenches, where weather-beaten wooden crosses, hung with withered flowers, remained to tell of the time when the French were holding these positions, then the front line. As they drew nearer to the Front, they passed imperceptibly from the zone of the biggest guns into the region of the lighter pieces. The guns were waking up. Now and then, as they pedalled along, a huge shell travelled over their heads, coming from their rear, "hooshing" and wailing as it sped through the air. Now from right and now from left of them ear-splitting reports resounded.

The traffic grew heavier as they approached their destination. At the entrance to a gloomy and shattered village, so wrecked by shell fire that every house was razed, the press of vehicles and of

troops going up and coming down was so great that our Ensign and his orderly had to get off and walk their bicycles. Presently all further progress was hindered; so, after waiting for a spell, our Ensign shouldered his heavy machine and struck out among the ruins to try and get round the block in the road. It was very heavy going; but at last, soaked with perspiration and breathless, our Ensign and his orderly emerged upon a fairly clear stretch of road, and pedalled off into the gathering darkness.

Fortunately the way was not difficult to find. At a cross-roads, where a mass of blackened poles sticking up against the evening sky denoted the former location of a wood, our travellers branched off to the left into a small country road.

Guns were firing everywhere now. The stench of their fumes lay heavy on the air. It was almost dark, and the green glare of their discharges lit up fitfully the struggling masses that thronged the little road. Long

lines of men in single file, stooping beneath the weight of two petrol tins filled with water, slung across their shoulders; similar lines laden with coils of wire, stakes, pickets and shovels; long columns of troops going to relieve battalions in the line; trains of mules, with tossing tails, plodding forward amid a hail of curses; ammunition carts, water-carts, . . . all were jumbled up together in that narrow way. From time to time came the low cry: "Make way! Stretcher-bearers!" and a stretcher would appear carried shoulder-high by four sweating bearers. Now and again, by the flash of the guns of a neighbouring battery, our Ensign caught a glimpse of a form, motionless, under blood-stained bandages. . . .

A few sand-bagged steps led into a narrow clearing made in the wood that ran along one side of the road. Over the steps hung the Brigade flag. The steps led up to a little kind of entrance way, where a number of officers were standing.

Behind them was a heavily sand-bagged shelter, where by the guttering light of a couple of candles, the signallers stooped over their telephones.

“Toot-toot! Toot-toot! Toot-toot!”

The telephones shrilled their note clearly above the deafening crash of the guns all round. The 18-pounders were firing in salvoes now. The very sandbags shook with the noise. The signallers were shouting down their telephones. Oblivious of everything, an officer sat at the bench beside them and wrote.

They were all Guards' officers in that little place. Our Ensign knew some of them. He spoke to a Coldstreamer whom he had met up in the salient, and asked him what the news was. The Coldstreamer said the Welsh Guards had had a baddish time; the Prince of Wales' Company, in particular, had suffered. He mentioned the names of several men who had been killed. They were all waiting for news of the Grenadiers:

they, too, had been having a roughish handling.

An officer with red tabs turned away from a very weary-looking Scots Guards captain, and came towards our Ensign. The young man reported himself, and was told that the guides were ready to take the two companies up to the line.

Then an orderly, covered with mud, emerged from nowhere, as orderlies do, with a message.

“Ah! from the Grenadiers!” said the officer in red tabs, and bolted off towards a deep dug-out in the corner.

Our Ensign bade good-night to the Coldstreamer, and went out again into the road. A regular whirlwind bombardment was in progress. The din was ear-splitting. Every gun for miles around seemed to be firing as fast as it could be loaded.

Our Ensign found his orderly staring open-mouthed at the distant horizon, where a never-ceasing spout of white lights marked

the winding line of the front trenches. The lad was very young, and he had not been long in France. As they surveyed the black horizon together and noted the orange spurts of flame where the shells were bursting among the Verey lights, a deep auburn glare suddenly lit up the whole devastation of the landscape, and spread, upwards and outwards, in slow majesty across the night sky.

"Glory be to God, sir!" exclaimed the orderly, "what's that?"

Our Ensign shook his head wisely.

"Looks like an ammunition dump going up!" he said, but he didn't in the least know. It was an extraordinary spectacle, lasting a full minute, during which every single projection on the horizon stood out hard and black against the flaming sky. It reminded our Ensign of the backgrounds of battle scenes in the portraits of the Generals at the "Senior."

Then they started off back to the bivouac

in the darkness. When they reached the main road they halted and waited for the two companies of the battalion which were marching up. Presently dark shapes loomed up in the gloom . . . the traffic was much lighter on the road now . . . and the second in command of our Ensign's battalion emerged into the bright glare of the young man's electric torch. Our Ensign indicated to the party the turning off the main road which would bring them to Brigade Headquarters, where the guides awaited them, imparted to his senior officer the news of the casualties in the Welsh Guards, and then set off along that broken road again on his perilous homeward journey.

He crawled into his sleeping-bag at half-past one in the morning, feeling that he had earned a good night's rest.

CHAPTER X.

“THE Battalion is moving off in an hour’s time, sir !”

Johnson stood over our Ensign, as he lay curled up in his Wolseley valise on the floor of his tent. A canvas bucket of hot water steamed in the servant’s hand. Our young man felt as though he had slept but an hour. Still, there was nothing for it, so he staggered in his pyjamas out into the sunshine, where The Beak, in similarly airy costume, was shaving himself at a little mirror propped up against the flap of his tent.

“Is it over the top for us, Beak ?” queried our Ensign of his company commander.

"Don't think so yet," mumbled The Beak under the lather; "it's fatigues for to-day, anyhow, . . . carrying up stuff for the fellows in the front line. Have a good time last night?"

"Ensanguined!" retorted our young man with feeling, as he soaped his face.

Once again he was doomed to travel that dusty road towards the Front, only this time he footed it at the head of his platoon, and he found walking to be a good deal easier than cycling. About the hour of 9 A.M. he led his platoon into the wood, which had been indicated to him as their destination.

Ravaged by shell fire, seamed by trenches, gashed and blood-drenched and blackened, that wood had seen some of the fiercest fighting of the War. Not a tree lived; there was not so much as a green leaf to gladden the eye; not a bird twittered in the branches. The wood and all in it were dead, as dead as the mouldering relics of the fight that were scattered plentifully about in the yawning

shell-holes, confined by the criss-cross of fallen trunks and torn branches.

The trenches in which the two companies were to live were in places foot-deep in water, so our Ensign and Bryan, by The Beak's directions, got the men to bale them out. By the time they had got the men comfortably settled it was luncheon time. Apollo invited our Ensign to accompany him on a tour of discovery round the wood. Our Ensign shook his head decisively. He thought not, thank you! He had some idea as to what an examination of that wood might reveal. He wouldn't mind going, but he'd have his lunch first. So they agreed to go afterwards, Roderick accompanying them.

Our Ensign felt glad that he had had his lunch when he looked upon the horrors which the deeper recesses of the wood contained. Those who have never seen a modern battlefield can have no idea of its utter and wanton *untidiness* . . . the extra-

ordinary jumble of arms and equipment and clothing, and papers and letters and playing-cards and empty bottles and crumbling remnants of food. The trenches were literally foot-deep in equipment in some places, with here and there a shapeless, inert mass of khaki or field-grey, as lax and limp as a sack of straw, which once had been a man.

One such scene of silent tragedy gave the three an unpleasant shock. It was in a remoter corner of the wood, where the bare and blackened tree-trunks stood closer together, where a line of wrecked dug-outs and a profusion of German equipment lying about showed that the enemy had made a stand. As our Ensign and his companions plunged in and out of the fallen tree-trunks and the splintered branches lying athwart the shell-craters, Apollo, who was leading, came to a sudden halt. He stood silent with pointing finger.

At his feet, pinned securely to the ground under a massive elm which had been torn

bodily from its roots by a shell, was a skeleton yet clothed in its mud-stained and mouldy field-grey. It lay on its face, prone beneath the weight of the tree, its arms outstretched in the form of a cross.

"Poor devil!" said Roderick.

"I expect it broke his back!" observed Apollo, stooping down to get a closer view of the grim figure. But our Ensign, who was fresher than they to these sights of war, said nothing. He was thinking of the shells screaming about those wrecked dug-outs, the crash of the falling trees, the reverberating explosions, the reek of sulphur, and that solitary German felled to the earth as he bolted for shelter, and pinned down among the chaos. . . .

The Beak met them as they sauntered back to tea.

"Sorry, old boy," he said to our Ensign; "there's a fatigue to-night. It'll be you, as Bryan did the last one!"

“Sir!” quoth the Ensign in his best manner, and proceeded to note his instructions. He was to take a party of seventy men and proceed to a certain R.E. Dump, the map reference of which was given to him, there collect various material, and thence go to a certain Brigade Headquarters, where he would receive further orders.

It was dark by the time the party started off. It was a black night, without moon or stars, and, as on the previous evening, the air trembled to the ear-splitting crash of the guns. The first thing our Ensign did was to lose his way. There was plenty of traffic on the roads, but everybody was either going up or coming down, and no one seemed to have ever heard of an R.E. Dump in those parts. At last the party met a Sapper officer.

“A Dump?” he said, in reply to a question. “I believe they are forming one

down there . . . about a mile along this road." And he pointed in the direction from which the party had come.

Our Ensign groaned, then faced about and led his men in the opposite direction. After marching for about a quarter of an hour, they came to a place by the roadside where some dark figures were moving about among large indistinguishable heaps.

"Is that the R.E. Dump?" sung out our Ensign.

"Yes! Is that the Guards' fatigue party?" came back from the darkness.

"Yes!" shouted our Ensign in return, switching on the lamp fastened to his belt.

A Staff Officer stepped out of the roadside blackness into the circle of light.

"Good evening!" he said genially. "They want you to take some of this stuff up to the Welsh Guards. If you report to them, they'll tell you what to do with it. I've got a guide here. This Dump was only formed this morning, so I don't quite know

what there is here ; but you just go ahead, and load up the men with anything you think useful. It's all for you fellows when you go over the top . . . you will want plenty of stuff to consolidate with ! You'll be all right then, will you ? They shell a bit as a rule going up, but the guide will lead you off the road into the open if it gets really dangerous. Good-night !”

He vanished into the night. A Grenadier private loomed up large in the patch of light.

“Guide, sir !” he said, saluting.

Our Ensign called his senior sergeant, and with him inspected the Dump. He then divided his men into as many groups as there were heaps of different material, and got them loaded up with rolls of barbed wire, pickets, stakes, giant coils of French wire, and so forth. When they were ready the men fell in in single file, and with the guide and our Ensign at the head, the party moved off into the darkness.

It was a good two-hours' march up to the Battalion Headquarters of the Welsh Guards. The guide led them out on to a narrow track which wound its solitary way across a bare immensity of plain, in and out of shell-holes lying so thick that the lip of one crater touched the lip of the other. It was a dank, raw night, with occasional gusts of rain. The cold wind blowing down the gentle slope of the plain brought the evil odour of death from the spouting lights on the horizon where the trenches lay.

The plain was a place of death. By the roadside, in every shell-hole, the dead lay thick, British and German—now a solitary corpse, its face a white patch in the gloom, now a little knoll of men stricken down by the one shell.

The going was terrible. Under the effect of the thousands of pounds of high explosive that had worked devastation over the slope the very earth had lost its binding power and crumbled like sand beneath the feet.

The darkness was intense. The men kept stumbling under their burdens, and more than one toppled headlong into a shell-hole, often on to the silent form of its uncoffined occupant. Our Ensign had learned already that in night marching the tendency of the head of a column is always to go too fast, yet though he steadied the pace down to a bare two miles an hour, the tail of the party kept on straggling behind. With the sweat running down his face, the officer spent the greater part of the march in stumbling hastily from one end of the long train to the other.

There was a good deal of sporadic shelling . . . principally "whizz-bangs," that stank most vilely in the nostrils. Most of the shells seemed to be falling about the road ahead of them, and presently the guide led the party off the track into the open, where everybody had to make the best of his way in and out of the shell-holes. At last the guide pointed to a dim

tangle of bare trees on the skyline to the right.

“That’s where we shall find the Welsh, sir!” he said.

He brought the party finally up to a white chalky trench, where, in the yellow light of a lantern, a group of officers were standing about the entrance to a deep and cavernous dug-out. A regimental aid-post was somewhere in the vicinity, for the sides of the trench were lined with stretchers, and the cry of “Make way for the stretcher-bearers!” kept resounding as fresh cases were brought in. Many of the forms lying on the stretchers on parapet and parados were field-grey. One of these figures, with a livid face, opened his eyes, as our Ensign stepped over him to reach the entrance of the dug-out, and murmured: “Ach! Mutter!”

Our Ensign reported himself to the Adjutant of the Welsh Guards, who was just emerging from the dug-out while the men

of his fatigue party, their forms looming large against the skyline, sat about and chatted with the orderlies and stretcher-bearers.

"We're just going out of this," said the Welsh Guardsman; "you'd better report to the Scots Guards. The Adjutant is about somewhere."

Our young man found the Adjutant, and reported himself again.

"R.E. material, eh?" said the latter. "Good. We shall want you to take it up to the left company in the front line. I've got a good guide here. He'll take you along."

Our Ensign felt a trifle dismayed, for he had imagined his night's labours to be over. He glanced at his wrist. It was 11 P.M.

They started off again, past the regimental aid-post, and out on to a sunken road, where the corpses lay thick. As they plodded on, they seemed to come to a

village, for crumbling bricks lay about the road. But of houses there was not a sign. Where the tide of battle has passed on the Somme you will not find stone left upon stone.

The guide, who had been leading them very confidently so far, now began to flag. He started to look about him. An awful suspicion seized upon the officer. He knew the symptoms well enough. He guessed what the guide's hesitation portended. There are very few officers who have served in the trenches in this war who have not been led astray by a guide some time or other.

A shell whizzed noisily overhead, and exploded close by with an appalling crash. Its orange burst revealed for a brief instant the devastation in that village of the dead.

"Mind yourself, sir!" called out the guide suddenly. Two figures came dash-

ing out of the darkness with levelled rifles.

“Hands up!” they yelled.

Our Ensign had pulled out his revolver.

“Stop that infernal noise!” he shouted, and then, heedless of consequences, he switched on his lamp.

Two figures in khaki were facing him.

“Are you British?” cried one, while the other gasped, panting—

“Oh dear! we’ve just walked into the German lines. Have you seen our officer, sir?” And they mentioned the name of their regiment.

Our Ensign could not help them, and presently they disappeared into the darkness. Then the party went plodding on until, once more, dark shapes loomed out of the night.

A Guards’ officer came towards our Ensign. He took off his cap and wiped his damp forehead.

“What a night!” he lamented. “My

infernal guide walked us plumb into the Hun lines. All the Huns were yelling, 'Come on! We're waiting for you!' We made a bolt for it. I can't make out why they didn't shoot. I suppose they weren't sure that some of their own fellows weren't out as well!"

Woo-oof!

A shell burst violently behind the group.

"Bad place to gossip in," said our Ensign. "I suppose you don't know where we are, do you?"

"Devil a bit!" was the reply.

"You'll find two of your men down the path a little way," said our Ensign; "they nearly shot us!"

"Right!" answered the other unconcernedly. "Well, cheery-oh! Where the hell's that guide?" . . .

He and his train padded past in the darkness.

Suddenly our Ensign's guide recognised a landmark.

"I know that dead horse, sir," he exclaimed; "it's a little piece along here! I know the way now!"

Indeed, in a little, he brought the party to the mouth of a trench. There our Ensign found a Scots Guards subaltern.

"Here we are again!" observed the latter serenely. "Cheerful spot."

"!!!!!!!!!" replied our Ensign. "Where do you want the stuff dumped?"

"What stuff?" returned the other, straining his eyes to peer into the outer blackness.

"R.E. material for the left company," said our Ensign.

"Right company here," answered the officer.

Our Ensign leant back against the parapet and, baring his head to the night, invoked the vengeance of the powers of darkness on the guide. Apparently the guide had likewise discovered his mistake, for from the mirky blackness outside the trench our Ensign heard a voice—the voice of one in authority—saying sternly—

“What dead horse?”

“The dead horse wot’s lying alongside of two dead Huns!” came the pathetic voice of the guide.

“The dead horse you wanted, me lad,” answered back the stern voice, “isn’t alongside of any Huns! It’s at the dead horse by the pond that you wanted to turn off!”

Our Ensign turned desperately to the officer.

“Look here!” he said firmly, “I’ve had enough of this nonsense. My men are dead-beat, and we are fed up with being led by a lot of fool guides into every barrage on this front. I’m going to dump the goods here, and you can send word along to the other company to come and fetch ’em!”

“My dear fellow,” replied the other, “you can’t do that. The other company probably wants your stuff urgently.”

“If they want it so badly, they can dam

well come and fetch it. I'm going home. It's half-past twelve and we've been footing it since seven ! ”

“ Look here,” said the other soothingly, “ I've got a sergeant of the left company here with me ; he's just brought a message across. You can go back with him ! ”

Our Ensign wavered.

“ How far is it ? ” he asked sullenly.

“ Sixteen hundred yards,” replied the other promptly.

Our Ensign reflected that, if this were a prevarication, the other would have said, “ Just over there ! ” or, “ A stone's-throw ! ” So he decided he would have to get those additional 1600 yards out of his weary men.

The sergeant appeared—a resolute person ; the two officers parted, and once more the fatigue party strung out on its way along the corpse - strewn path. The men were very tired, so our Ensign marched in the rear and kept the stragglers together.

A lot of shells were coming over now, exploding noisily in the ruins of the village. But our Ensign hardly noticed them. He was desperately concerned lest, while he prevented the tail of his party from being left behind and lost, the head might be walking straight into the German lines.

The long train sagged, and finally halted. Our Ensign scrambled, fuming, to the head.

"Where's that guide?" he demanded.

"He's just after going to look for the way, sir!" said a soft Irish voice, which added: "Wirra, that's near!" as a shell crashed into the ground close by.

Our Ensign got all the men into shell craters. The sights in those deep holes were enough to make a man sick. Then he told his sergeant he would give the guide five minutes by the watch. If he had not turned up at the end of that period of grace, they would dump their stuff where they were and steer for home by the compass.

Those were the longest five minutes our Ensign had ever spent. He was tormented by the fear lest a shell might fall in the midst of his party, and he should have twenty or thirty casualties to report on returning to the Wood. The shells came over fairly thick—about two a minute,—but they all burst beyond the men in their shell-holes. The men were magnificently cool. It struck our Ensign that they were more concerned at not having reached their journey's end, tired out as they were, than at the dangers surrounding them.

Then a voice shouted from the darkness—

“Here you are! This way!”

Ten minutes later our Ensign led his party back along the sunken road and across the brown, shell-scarred slope. Weary though the men were, they were only too glad to force the pace and leave behind them the sights and sounds of the night.

“They're saying behind, sir,” said the

senior sergeant to our Ensign, as the party trudged along, "couldn't we go a bit faster?"

"Oh! all right!" replied our Ensign carelessly, and quickened his pace. But he did not tell the sergeant that the same idea had long since occurred to him.

CHAPTER XI.

“The present day has no value for me except as the eve of to-morrow: it is with to-morrow that my spirit wrestles.”—
METTERNICH.

THE day was already three hours old by the time that our Ensign reached the Wood with his weary fatigue party. The trenches were wrapped in slumber, and from Bryan, upon whose recumbent form our Ensign trampled as he groped his way into the company dug-out, he learnt that the two companies which had been in the line had already gone back to the bivouac on the downs, and that the two companies in the Wood were expecting momentarily to be relieved. There was no news of future movements: none of the officers,

Bryan said, knew when the Guards were going to "pop the parapet."

Two hours later, effectively, the relief turned up, and the two companies plodded out into the chilly morning back to their bivouac. It was not until 8 A.M. that the officers got into their sleeping-bags in the tents.

At noon the faithful Johnson aroused our Ensign with the news that a conference of officers had been called by the Commanding Officer, and that they were waiting for him. He splashed some water over himself, tore into his clothes, crammed his cap on over his tousled hair, and dashed off with a silent prayer that his unshaven chin might escape observation. But everybody was too deep in maps and plans to notice him. He and his brother officers left the conference knowing all there was for them to know about the impending attack, save only the detail that interested them all most keenly—the date!

The Battalion was to strike bivouac that evening, and march to a wood on the fringe of that corpse-strewn plain across which our Ensign had led his fatigue party the night before. Two companies were to be quartered in one corner of the wood, the remainder—Nos. 1 and 2 Companies—in a little copse on the eastward edge,—nearest the enemy, as our Ensign, with the shells of the previous evening in his mind, reflected sombrely. It was generally expected that the four companies would not meet again until they assembled for the attack.

There was a little pang of parting in that dirty bivouac among the rolling downs. As a measure of precaution, such experienced officers and non-commissioned officers as could be spared were not to accompany the Battalion into action, so as to leave an executive nucleus to carry on with, in the event of heavy casualties. Of our Ensign's mess, Peter and The Don were of this number. Sadder and more dismal faces never

were seen than the countenances of these two (and of their comrades in exile also, be it said) as they bade the departing companies God-speed and prepared to join the Transport.

At dusk that evening, in a drenching downpour of cold rain, the Battalion moved off into the unknown, our Ensign's company bringing up the rear. Truly it is a dismal thing, this marching into action! One hears an iron curtain clang down behind one, shutting off the past—and there were fragrant memories in our Ensign's mind of the pleasant *cameraderie* of the vanished summer—while the present glides imperceptibly away before the doubts and uncertainties of the future.

The rain splashed dismally down, the road was heavy and slippery with glutinous mud, and all around them the guns crashed out into the night with a roar that seemed to crack the very tympanum. The men hunched their waterproof sheets over their

packs, and trudged along in mournful silence; and our Ensign let his mind toy despondently with the difference between his situation and that of men he knew, spick and span and spurred and polished these last, holding decorative positions on the Staff at home.

They plodded along the same old highway of the battlefield, as crowded as ever, thronged with the same old mass of tired men, and straining, plunging horses and mules. Plenty of bad language, especially in the blocks of traffic, which were frequent, came back at them from the night, while the rain plopped sadly into the puddles of the roadside; and, with green flash and reek and roar, the shells screamed their way through the night towards the soaring horizon lights. As they drew nearer to the front they heard the whistle and crash of German shells ahead of them in the darkness.

At last they left the road and followed

a guide in single file along a muddy foot-path, which brought them into the wet tangle of a devastated wood. As the men filed off into some crumbling trenches, our Ensign noticed three forms on the ground covered by waterproof sheets beside the wreck of a Lewis gun hand-cart.

"It was hard luck," somebody was saying; "they caught us coming in . . . shrapnel, it was . . . got these three at the very end of the line."

Then there was much groping and slipping about in the dark, as the officers got the two companies into such accommodation as the broken trenches and gaping shell-holes afforded—a rum issue, at which our Ensign found himself compelled to swallow, according to immemorial usage, nearly a mugful of the spirit, poured out of the stone jars by the dim light of a carefully-shaded candle; and then the men began to contrive for themselves all sorts of wonderful shelters for the night with riddled fragments of cor-

rugated iron sheeting, beams of wood, splintered branches and withered leaves. The officers left them to their task, and made their way to the dug-out which the Billeting Officer had designated to them as their quarters.

It was a great big shelter, as large as a small shed—and a shell-hole in the roof, which was the only damage, had been stuffed up with those wicker cases which the German gunners used to carry their live shells in. The place was constructed rather like a log-cabin, dug half a dozen feet deep in the ground, with solid timber sides and a roof of iron girders wattled over. The floor was covered with those wood or paper shavings which, under the influence of the British blockade, the Germans use in preference to straw. These shavings furnish bedding that is fully as clean and comfortable as straw, and certainly far more economical.

There was a very simple military funeral that night under the drenching rain, in the

shell-ravaged copse. In a shell-hole the three victims of the night were laid to rest, and covered in. Two of the men were Catholics, the third Protestant, and both the R.C. and the C. of E. padres came up through the rain and mud that night to conduct the obsequies. And the next evening a plain wooden cross, well carpentered and neat, inscribed in black paint with the names and numbers of the fallen Guardsmen, arrived with the rations, and was set up over the little grave, a landmark in that devastated countryside, the place of the unburied dead.

Like the wood which our Ensign had already explored on a former occasion, the copse and the wood beyond had been the scene of one of the Homeric fights of the battle of the Somme. This wood, too, was full of corpses, both British and German, and strewn with rain-soaked and rusting relics of the fray, lying amid battered trenches and wrecked dug-outs. During

the days they spent in the copse, the men of the two companies spent their whole time in clearing the wood, stacking up the rifles, the bayonets, the equipment, collecting such identity discs as still remained on the dead before burying them, and bringing in to the officers' dug-out German shoulder-straps and letters and papers of all kinds. These were in due course sent down to the Brigade to be handed over to the Army Intelligence.

In the copse itself a German battery had been posted. There were indications that it had had its home there for many months. The dug-outs had been very well made, deep and comfortable, though the British heavy shells had played havoc with them now. In one a provision store was found, with tier upon tier of very mouldy black bread stacked up to the roof, many tins of canned meat (one ingenious Ensign introduced a tin of German brawn into the mess and opened it for lunch, professing to find it delicious), and some tins of sardines.

Another was stored with cordite charges. It was beneath the covered entrance leading down to this particular dug-out that our Ensign found the mess cook installed over a large fire, with burst bags of cordite lying all around. He was sternly bidden to shift his quarters elsewhere—which he did with an injured air.

Rooting about in the wood with MacFinnigan, our Ensign came upon a dug-out which had all but collapsed, a dead German, buried, save for his boots, at the entrance. MacFinnigan, who had no squeamishness about such matters, wormed his way into the dug-out, and presently began to hand up newspapers and letters and labels off parcels, brought by the *Feldpost* for the two bombardiers who, as the addresses on the various articles showed, must have lodged there. One was a Jew from Frankfurt-on-Main, who had a large correspondence with innumerable Cohns and Abrahams and Levys, mostly of the femi-

nine persuasion; the other appeared to have been a Bavarian. Among the latter's letters was one from his wife, which gave a brief but tragic glimpse of the misery of everyday life in Germany in war-time—a side of the question which is rarely illumined in the newspapers. The letter was angry and bitter. After a long complaint about the growing food difficulties and appalling price of everything, the woman, who wrote from a Bavarian village, told of some hitch in the payment of her separation allowance, and narrated how she had been to the Mayor to get redress, and had been “flung out” (*hinausgeschmissen*). In a torrent of unpunctuated, ungrammatical German, with many appeals to the “dear husband,” she asked if that was the way the wives of brave German “warriors” should be treated, if “they” expected the people to make the enormous sacrifices demanded of them, when “they” unjustly deprived the women of their due.

The husband's answer was there too . . . begun on a field post-card (in the German army these are issued blank to the men) from the dug-out in the wood and never finished . . . interrupted, maybe, by the shell that smashed the dug-out and killed the man lying outside—who perhaps was the writer himself. It began in a torrent of abuse—the language of a man of the people defending his woman, setting forth the wife's complaint, asking how men who skulked at home dared so to treat the wife of a German "warrior." . . . And there the scrawling writing broke off short. The guns of the Somme had prevented a Bavarian Mayor from getting a post-card which would probably have momentarily soured the taste of his dinner beer.

Our Ensign had been given a definite job in the impending attack. He was told he was not to "go over" with his company, but would act as Intelligence Officer, and in this capacity accompany the Second-in-

command with a select party. The duties entrusted to him necessitated a good knowledge of the ground over which the attack was to be made; so one afternoon, whilst they were waiting in the copse, our Ensign got leave from The Beak, and, taking MacFinnigan, carrying a telescope, along with him, he set out to find out some eminence from which he might survey the scene.

Side by side, officer and orderly traversed the long brown slope which our Ensign had hitherto only crossed on a famous occasion at night. Then the darkness had mercifully hidden from their eyes the full horror of the battlefield which now lay in all its ghastliness before them, bare and brutal, in the soft light of a mild autumn day. Our Ensign blessed the name of John Cotton of Edinburgh as he marched along puffing at his briar. Truly tobacco is the sovereign herb in war: not only does it calm the nerves—it also dulls the sense of smell.

As they went up the ridge, our Ensign

chatted with his orderly. MacFinnigan had a great thirst for knowledge: a secret was in the air which he would fain penetrate. . . .

“Is it a fact, sir? . . . Some of the men in the company were saying, sir . . . They do tell me, sir . . .”

What was the secret?

Hush, hush!

Wait and see! Whatever it was, it so engrossed our Ensign that it carried him right over the ridge and to the banks of a sunken road that ran transversely to his line of advance, where he was brought up short in his tracks.

Our Ensign had heard of the Germans being mowed down in swathes as they rushed hurraing in dense formation to the attack of the forts of Liège; he had been told of the bridge at Landrecies piled high with German corpses after the Coldstream had given the ‘Hun a taste of the Guards’ rapid fire; he had had described to him how

the British naval guns cleaved great furrows in the ranks of Germany's youthful legions on the Yser as they went forward hand in hand, singing their soldier songs, to break through to Calais. He had heard of these things, I say, and had read of them in the papers like everybody else, but he had yet to realise what a shock one can get when the mental picture evoked by a newspaper paragraph comes in contact with the reality.

For he found himself on the high banks of that sunken road looking down upon piles of German dead, two, three, four, and even five layers deep. The road had been put into a rough state of defence, and every embrasure cut out of the bank nearest the British had its ghastly mound of corpses. Their numbers he could not estimate, what their regiment he would not venture close enough to determine; he only knew that these men had died obeying their army order that Ginchy must be held to the last man . . . and the

road was full of these gallant dead. By every embrasure one or two dead British soldiers were lying — probably, our Ensign thought, the first men to adventure into the trench of that forlorn German hope : one such khaki-clad figure still had his hands at the throat of the German across whose body he was lying with another German on top of him.

Even the unsqueamish MacFinnigan was overcome at the sight.

“How horrible, sir,” he said ; and then added, as an afterthought, “but they were brave men !”

Our Ensign lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. Then he gave one to the orderly, and they passed on up the slope.

CHAPTER XII.

"'Twas brillig and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble. . . ."

—*The Slaying of the Jabberwock.*

"DID ye hear what that man O'Flanagan was sayin', him I mane as come up with the wather party las' night?"

The speaker was a red-haired Irish Guardsman — what they would call in Ireland a "foxy man" — who was cleaning his rifle and chatting the while with a grizzled comrade, who was composedly scraping the mud off his puttees with a piece of stick preparatory to going on parade for rifle inspection. Our Ensign, standing in the open watching a British aeroplane having a thrilling time in and out of Hun shrapnel puffs, over-

heard the men talking in the trench behind him.

The elder man, busy with his scraping, only grunted contemptuously.

“Didn’t he see them with his own eyes,” the foxy man continued, tugging at his pull-through, “leppin’ the ditch and off across the open the same as they might be a lot of young horses? ‘The Lord save us!’ sez th’ officer, him as was with the wather party, ‘’tis the cateypillars!’ ‘Cateypillars?’ sez O’Flanagan, the chap as was tellin’ us about it — ‘cateypillars is ut?’ sez he. ‘Begob,’ sez he, ‘’tis the first time ever I see cateypillars lep a ditch!’”

The other flung away his piece of stick, rubbed his hands together to get rid of the mud, and cast a leisurely glance over his person.

“Some of you young lads,” he said, “do be believin’ all you hears!”

“Amn’t I after tellin’ yez that O’Flanagan see thim himself?” answered the foxy man

heatedly, applying his eye to the barrel of his rifle. "Like great crockeydiles they are, sez he, with a crew of thirty men in their inside and machine-guns and bombs and God knows what else, sez he, and little windies to give the lads inside a blasht of fresh air. Is ut tellin' us lies the man was?"

"I wouldn't be sayin' that," the old soldier replied cautiously; "but some of you young lads has no sinse."

And with that he stumped off to rifle inspection.

Now you know what our Ensign and his orderly were talking about so earnestly as they trudged up the ridge in the last chapter. They spoke of the Tanks, or, as they were then called, the Hush-hushes, which everybody had heard about and nobody had seen—the mysterious engines which were to lead the Guards into battle on a date not appointed.

Naturally it was Apollo who saw them

first in the flesh, or should one say more correctly, in the steel plating? He blew into the officers' dug-out after rifle inspection that morning and said in a tone of decision—

“I've seen 'em!”

“Who?” said our Ensign.

“What?” said Roderick more grammatically.

“Where?” said The Beak, whose forensic mind had already divined to what Apollo referred.

“Just off the road, about 300 yards from here, . . . the Tanks . . . a squadron of them . . . charming fellow in charge . . . showed me all round . . . amazing, wonderful . . . come along and I'll take you down there!”

So they all trooped off behind him down the road, and presently in a wayside field came upon those monstrously grotesque and ungainly “ingins,” which everybody has seen in the photographs in the papers, and

which nobody is allowed to describe. A small and rotund Commodore . . . or whatever a Tank squadron commander is called, . . . who confessed to having been out of bed for two nights, did the honours very charmingly, . . . but let us tread softly, for we are on censored ground. Let it suffice to say that a captain, a subaltern, and three ensigns returned to the officers' dug-out, and swanked insufferably to their less fortunate comrades-in-arms who had not been among the first to see the Tanks, and that MacFinnigan and another orderly, who had been taken with the party, had the morning of their lives, the centre of an enthralled group of Guardsmen, all panting for information about "the crocodiles."

And for the moment everybody's mind was taken off the future.

But that afternoon—it was September 14th—the Commanding Officer came up, and the officers were bidden into the dug-out for a final conference, at which, among

many other equally, but to at least one of them, less important details, they were informed that they would attack at 6.20 A.M. in the morning, and that they would move up into position at 9 o'clock that night.

That afternoon the men sat about in the trenches . . . those of them that were not otherwise employed . . . and talked and smoked and read the curious provincial papers sent out to them from home. Only a bare handful of letters came in to the dug-out to be censored that afternoon. The British soldier prefers to do his work first and write about it afterwards. The men seemed bored by the waiting about. They yawned, and cocked an eye at the sky, and discussed the weather prospects for the next day, and argued unendingly about "the crocodiles," and the surprise they would be to "Fritz."

In the course of the afternoon The Don turned up, in full battle array, beaming

with delight. After all, he was to "go over" with the company. It had been decided that another officer should remain behind in his place. That officer was one of the party in the dug-out in the copse . . . a spirit more ardent for battle never breathed in mortal man . . . and he was stricken dumb, beaten to the ground, with the force of his disappointment. Our Ensign, seeing the utter abasement of his grief, reflected on the strange ways that Providence adopts to reveal the pure metal that gleams in men of the British Army.

While it was still light, some of them went out to have a look at the positions which they were to take up that evening, and from which they were to attack in the morning. Night marching across the open, even when you know the ground, is no joke; but when your direction leads you across wide trenches running at every imaginable angle, through tangles of barbed wire and over country that is nothing more

or less than an infinite number of holes connected together by a little loose earth, why then, much forethought and preparation are required if you wish to avoid disaster. So the officers who went out reconnoitring took with them one man per platoon to mark the way and act as guides when they should go up that evening. To mark the route the guides stuck a few landmarks about in the shape of rusty rifles, picked up off the battlefield, inserted in the earth by the bayonet and decorated with a German helmet or a haversack—anything to catch the eye at night when seen against the skyline.

The officers dined together in the dug-out at 7.30 that evening, a very friendly and very business-like party of men. The table-talk was pure unadulterated shop, the discussion of small details of company organisation with occasional desultory snatches of debate upon that fertile theme—the Tanks. But the greater issues of

the morrow were avoided by tacit consent, and a stranger suddenly bidden to that dinner-table could hardly have supposed (our Ensign says) that his hosts were preparing for anything more serious than a field-day on a large scale.

Our Ensign has often since looked back upon that last dinner of Nos. 1 and 2 Company Mess—the last supper of the Girondins somebody called it,—the long table (cunningly contrived out of trench-boards) covered with the famous white American cloth cover, the candles stuck in bottles, the white enamel mess crockery, the familiar faces all round the board, the background of raincoats and glasses and revolvers and belts hung on nails hammered into the tree-trunks forming the walls of the dug-out; and in the chiaroscuro of the upper part of the room the dimly-seen features of the Mess servants as they passed to and fro.

Some one had stored up a bottle of champagne for this special occasion; needless to say it had been forgotten, and the Girondins raved at the thought that their comrades back at the Transport were in all probability even now toasting them in the goblet that should have foamed at *their* lips. So the double-company Mess had to fall back upon a very moderate supply of a somewhat anæmic claret. They would have undoubtedly pledged one another in this rare old wine (vintage, Félix Potin, Amiens), only this formality was unfortunately overlooked in a furious discussion which arose in the matter of fixing the responsibilities in the affair of the forgotten bottle of champagne.

All through dinner messages kept arriving, company sergeant-majors or orderlies bulking large in the low entrance to the dug-out. Here an officer scribbled a note or an acknowledgment in his notebook laid

flat beside his plate: there a couple of ensigns, amid the stewed pears in soup-plates, the glasses, the candles in their bottles, and the white mugs of steaming coffee, pored over their maps for the hundredth time to fix in their memories a mental picture of the morrow's line of advance. Servants crept in with flasks or water-bottles filled, or with sandwiches wrapped in paper. Many were the beverages recommended as sovereign for battle by the veterans. One urged rum-and-water, another neat whisky, a third cold tea, a fourth tea mixed with brandy. The last recipe appeared to command most suffrages, and our Ensign accordingly decided for it.

As the hour of departure drew near, one by one, gradually, the officers rose from the sandbag divan on which they had sat at meat and started to array themselves for battle, girding on their belts hung with a manifold collection of apparatus. One by one they clapped their helmets on their

heads and stumped up the little stair into the night.

Thus, imperceptibly, the double-company Mess broke up, and the partnership of the summer months was dissolved for ever.

It was a cold, clear, starlit night, but still darkish, for the moon had not yet risen. Once outside the dug-out, our Ensign heard the low murmur of voices, the clatter of accoutrements from the open space in front of the trenches where the company was assembling. On the road in front he could see dim figures slowly advancing up the ridge: he guessed these to be the other two companies, who had bivouacked in the other part of the wood, moving up to their positions for the attack.

No smoking or talking was allowed; and it was in the most complete silence that at length the two companies moved away, a platoon at a time, each behind its guide. The air was dry and cold, with a touch

of frost: it would be cold sleeping out in the open, but anything was better than rain.

The guides picked up their landmarks and led the men without trouble into the segment of trench allotted to them. The trench was crumbling from the autumn rains that had eaten into its shell-scored sides. In parts it had a foot of water. There were many corpses in it. There was no shelling. The night was very still. Only on the horizon, beyond the ridge which on the morrow the Guards would cross, the star-shells soared into a brief span of brilliant life, flickered, and died. Quietly the men slipped into their places in the trench, or, where it was water-logged, into shell-holes behind.

Now the moon, waning from full, began to rise and to shed its silver radiance on the muffled forms asleep in shell-hole and in trench amid the unburied dead. In the cold white light the ruined farm behind the

sleeping figures looked like a bleached skeleton, and the devastation surrounding them stood out hard and clear. In the distance the star-shells less brilliant than their wont in the effulgence of the moon, seemed to beckon. . . .

CHAPTER XIII.

"One Moment in Annihilation's Waste,
 One Moment, of the Well of Life to taste—
 The Stars are setting, and the Caravan
 Starts for the Dawn of Nothing—O make haste!"
 —OMAR KHAYYÁM.

OUR Ensign awoke with a start. His limbs were stiff and cold. He felt frozen to the very marrow. The earth of his shell-hole was firm to the touch under the night's frost. The sky was tinted like a thrush's egg, and in the wide expanse of bluey green the stars were paling to the rising of the sun.

The air was all astir with movement. It was still the twilight of dawn, and here and there about the broken trenches and yawn-

ing shell-holes, where the Battalion had passed the night, patches of white mist hung, like the ghosts of the uncoffined dead that lay so thick upon the barren slope. The atmosphere was cold and deliciously clear, but the earth, warming to the sluggish approach of day, exhaled the sweet and clammy odour of death blended with the scent of freshly-turned clay,—the smell of the battlefield of the Somme.

As our Ensign struggled to his feet and surveyed the scene from his shell-hole, he saw all around him men hoisting on their equipment, talking in low murmurs the while. To restore the circulation to his frozen limbs he walked briskly over to the left, where the trenches of his company lay. He was surprised to find how cool and business-like the men were, as they strapped up their haversacks and struggled into their equipment. They talked in low tones. They groused about the cold, about the discomfort of the night; but on every face was

seen a look of relief that the period of waiting was almost over, rather than of apprehension at the trial that was to come.

The old soldiers were, with their ingrained fatalism, very deliberate and quite chatty. The young men were quieter and some a little fretful. But, as our Ensign walked along the trench and exchanged a word or two with the men of his own platoon, he found that, under all the superficial calm, something was smouldering into flame that he had never noticed in them before.

The guns were still barking away steadily. Listening, our Ensign could distinguish the characteristic notes—the sharp salvoes of the field-guns, flinging their projectiles, six at a time, into the enemy wire on the other side of the ridge, the deeper rush of the 6-inch guns, and the swooping flight, starting far away in the rear, of the heavy howitzer shells. Here he ran across the officers of his company. The Beak was as serenely magisterial as ever.

"I wish you were coming with the company, old boy!" he said to our Ensign, who cordially echoed the wish.

"You fellows will go romping gaily through the demoralised Hun," dolefully observed our young man, "and do prodigies of valour, while I shall get the whole of the German barrage coming over the ridge, and probably get done in before I have had a chance of displaying those feats of intelligence which are expected of me!"

"Don't you worry," remarked Bryan darkly; "you'll probably be commanding the company by breakfast-time!"

Then they wished one another good luck and went their ways, for the men were forming up, while over the still morning air a most remarkable sound came floating.

That steady, low throbbing was indescribably exhilarating. The men pricked up their ears and began pointing excitedly to the crest of the ridge ahead, where strange,

amorphous masses seemed to be crawling inch by inch through the mists of morning. In a moment the pangs of waiting, which always increase as the fatal hand casts its shadow upon the appointed hour, had fled. Every eye was following the snail-like progress of those strange, humming monsters: every mind was rehearsing the effect they would produce when they blundered out of the clinging haze into the enemy's front line. Thus the Tanks made their *début* in the history of warfare, and whatever importance posterity may allot to their share in the victory of September 15, to their inventors be given the thanks of the Guards' Division, for that His Majesty's Landships whiled away a *mauvais quart d'heure* when the Guards were waiting to attack.

Our Ensign found Headquarters in a shell-hole, the Commanding Officer talking over some final point with the Adjutant and the Drill-Sergeant. The sky had

changed from pale green to lemon, and the delicate yellow, where it touched the brown line of the ridge, was burnished to a deeper gold by the flood of light from the rising sun. The mists were all but melted. Another day had begun.

So few objects had the tide of battle, sweeping across the undulating plain, left standing, that their outlines, isolated, bare in the clear morning light, left their impress for ever on our Ensign's memory, . . . the blackened tree-trunks dotting the ruined site of the village on the right of the ridge, with a forest of bare poles marking the wood behind, the barren ridge between, the confused mass of broken trees to the left denoting that famous D—— Wood in which the horrors of the Somme battlefield reached their climax.

6.15. Every one is on his feet now—the officers with their helmets well strapped on under their chins, stick in one hand, map in the other, revolver at their belt, their

orderly at their elbow; the men with bayonets fixed, gleaming here and there in the sun, armed *cap-à-pie*, their big frames leaning on their rifles in such poses of unconscious grace as would have thrilled the heart of Meissonier or Détaillé.

The throbbing of the Tanks has ceased. Still, the guns pound steadily on with their appointed task. There is the low humming of an aeroplane engine somewhere in the sky, but the light is too dazzling for one to see it.

It is an eerie thing to stand on the threshold of history. Before them stretched the ridge, blank as the unwritten page. Would victory or defeat, success or failure, stand inscribed thereon before the sun, that even now was bathing the shell-scarred earth with light, had sunk to rest? What hazards awaited them over that low and corrugated crest? What triumphs, what agony, what tears would the next hours bring?

Then the whistles sounded, and with a roar like the breaking of a tropical squall, the hurricane was let loose. Amid the most appalling roar of guns the Guards moved steadily off up the long brown slope, while from the German lines in the distance rose great spouts of red and green and white rockets clamouring for a barrage. Those cascades of coloured lights were frantic in their appeal, bursting high in the air above the exploding shells and dense pillars of white and black and yellow smoke, silent amid the furious din of battle, but emphatic in their cry . . . "Help us quickly . . . we are being attacked!" . . . the S.O.S. of the battlefield.

The whole line moved forward in a dense irresistible impact, wave upon wave. The din was indescribable. The rising shriek of the shells, simultaneous, successive, incessant, formed a vast diapason accompaniment to the snap and whinny and whistle of the bullets whirling through the air.

Our Ensign, plodding along with a select party, led by the Second-in-command, in the centre of the attack, felt his blood boiling to the thrill of that mighty roar of noise. The sense of power which the guns gave was overwhelmingly exhilarating. He looked about him, and saw that the men all around were bubbling with high spirits as they trudged forward in and about and around the shell-holes. There was no rush about this attack. It was a slow, steady advance, relentless, irresistible.

It carried every man onward with it in its stride. It carried our Ensign, new as he was to war, with indifference, as it seemed to him at the time, past white and flaccid figures lying in curiously bent positions in or on the edges of the shell-holes, past men moaning and running with blood, past others shivering with ghastly wounds. In and out of the line trotted the stretcher-bearers, big stolid men,—they are chosen for their inches in the Guards, for they

have heavy burdens to carry,—perspiring and blowing and brave, with an utter indifference to danger that was good to see. As he went forward up the ridge, glancing continually at the map folded open in his hand, for there was a tricky turn to make at the top, our Ensign suddenly came upon a white and silent figure, a young ensign of the Coldstream, lying dead upon one outflung arm, his face towards the advancing line, his feet towards the crest of the slope. He was very young, and our Ensign had known him, as one knows men in the army, from different occasions that had brought them together in the field. He remembered him as a pleasant, handsome boy, and our Ensign noticed, as he glanced at him in passing, that he had not changed in death.

Now they had reached the top of the ridge. The German barrage was in full blast. From the crest the ridge ran down a little and then mounted again to the

flat horizon. From crest to skyline the whole intervening space seemed to be flecked with shell-bursts, and in and out of the white and black smoke-drifts went the long steady lines.

About the crest of the ridge and on either slope the German shells crashed heavily, with a thud that made the air tremble, with a reek of sulphur that caught the breath, with sickening clouds of heavy black smoke. Still, the British guns maintained their ceaseless roar, still their shell-bursts dotted the horizon, still the air hummed and whirred with the flying bullets.

The advance had stopped for an instant. The lines of Guardsmen before, around, and behind our Ensign halted erect upon the skyline. Men wiped their brows, for the going had been heavy, and passed the time of day with their friends.

Our Ensign caught a glimpse of many of his friends — The Don, with his best Balliol manner, the strap of his helmet

under the point of his chin, his eyeglass in his eye; Bruce, one of the company commanders, was there too, sitting in the shell-hole into which he had been blown, taking a careful compass bearing; also Apollo, tying up a sergeant who had been hit.

Then the advance went forward again—steady, slow, relentless as before, and presently once more it came to a halt. Something stirring was happening on the lower slope of the ridge. There the lines were rushing forward. Between the drifts of the smoke there was a glimpse of charging figures, a glint of the sun on naked bayonets. . . .

As our Ensign stood gazing through the haze of the shell-bursts the lines enclosing him seemed to go wild. A mad yell—not a cheer, but the deep-throated battle-cry of an ancient fighting race—rang out all about him. He glanced around to find himself in the midst of the Irish Guards, “whorooing” like a thousand souls in tor-

ment, laughing, shouting, yelling. In the centre of the picture was a striking group. Three Irish Guardsmen stood together, magnificent men all, built as massive as oaks, their eyes dancing with excitement. One leaned upon his rifle, his head thrust forward as he gazed enraptured upon that charge down in the valley; the centre figure was bareheaded, and across his chest, blown flat by the breeze, was the green flag of Erin with its golden harp; while the third Guardsman, holding his rifle with its shining bayonet in his left hand, rested his right upon his comrade's shoulder. And the man with the flag was bellowing like a bull—

“Go it, the Coalies! We're behind yez, me boys! The Micks is on your heels!”

Below, at the foot of the slope, a sturdy figure, a little silver hunting-horn to its lips, plodded serenely forward, . . . the Commanding Officer of the Coldstream Guards in his familiar French shrapnel hel-

met, with the ridged crown under its khaki cover, in the midst of the shouting, charging line of the remnants of his battalion who had rallied to the horn of the Tanat-side Harriers.

Then amid a fierce crescendo of yells the Irish Guards went forward in a rush like a pack of hounds. There was no stopping them. The killing had begun, and they must be in at the death. As they vanished tempestuously into the haze our Ensign heard a sharp cry beside him.

“Oh, sir !”

MacFinnigan was on the ground, his left arm limp, the blood gushing out from his shoulder. Our Ensign plucked his field-dressing from his pocket in the lining of his jacket, and bound the man up as best he could. The orderly was very game, for, though he made no sound, his face showed that he was in pain. Our Ensign gave him a drink out of his water-bottle . . . tea and brandy mixed . . . and turned to the

Second-in-command, who was speaking to him.

"They've stopped again," he said. "Isn't that Bruce over there by the road? I wonder why they are not going on. I think you'd better go and ask Bruce, and come back here and tell me, so that we can send back word to the Commanding Officer."

Our Ensign marked the spot where he left the party. The Second-in-command was in a shell-hole beside a blackened stump of a telegraph pole, MacFinnigan at his feet. On the crest of the ridge, exposed to the full blast of machine-gun fire and the barrage, there were many dead and wounded. The air was full of bullets, the shells were bursting noisily all over the place, and our Ensign frequently resisted a strong inclination to duck.

Presently he came across two stretcher-bearers of his own battalion. They were bending over a man who was obviously at the point of death.

“He’s gone,” said the first stretcher-bearer. “Come on now, Michael!” as our Ensign came up. The officer asked them to attend to his orderly, pointing to the place with his stick.

“Sir!” said the first stretcher-bearer, straightening himself up. Our Ensign remembered this little touch of formality afterwards, and recollected that, at the time, this echo of the “square” had not struck him as unusual.

He reached the spot where he thought he should find Bruce, but it turned out to be an officer of another Brigade who had strayed a little off the line. The Coldstream had been held up, he told our Ensign, by a couple of unsuspected trenches between them and the first objective, but the line had gone on now.

Our Ensign hastened back to report. As he had gone over to the right the advance had passed on in his absence, and the ground was deserted save for the wounded and the

dead. As he hurried over the broken ground a bullet sang past his ear with a loud crack. A man nursing a bleeding leg in a shell-hole called out to him—

“They’re sniping from the dug-outs, sir. You’ll want to mind yourself!”

Our Ensign plunged on. Suddenly out of a shell-hole at his very feet scrambled a tall, wan figure in grey, a blood-stained bandage wound about his head. Our young man had his revolver out in a second. But the stranger made no show of resistance. He was repeating to himself in a sing-song voice—

“Kamerad! Nicht schiessen! Kamerad! Nicht schiessen!”

Our Ensign drove the German on in front of him until he came to a sunken road where a Grenadier sergeant and half a dozen men were marshalling a score or so of much-dishevelled German prisoners. He handed over the German, who was still crooning his song, and pursued his way towards the shell-hole by the blackened telegraph pole.

He found it deserted. The Second-in-command, MacFinnigan, the rest of the party, all had vanished. On the ground lay a blood-stained whistle and some shreds of field-dressing.

The German shell fire had greatly increased in intensity. They were now laying a barrage over the whole scene of the advance. Our young man found that walking alone over heavy, shell-swept ground is a very different thing from sweeping forward with the advancing line, with courage and resolution running, like an electric fluid, from man to man. So he bent his head and started to get over the ground and out of the barrage as hard as he could.

Strange and manifold are the encounters of the battlefield. A brief half an hour before, the brown and furrowed slope, up which our Ensign was painfully making his way to the farther ridge beyond which the Guards had disappeared, had been No Man's

Land—the desolate tract at which, from the front trenches, one would peer furtively through a periscope. Now it was the highway of the battlefield, strewn with the wastage of the fight, traversed by the lagging steps of the wounded.

There is this vision in our Ensign's memory, . . . an officer with half his tunic torn to ribbons, one bare arm wrapped in bandages protruding from his shirt, bareheaded, livid of face, besmeared with mud and blood. He staggered like a drunkard as he walked straight ahead, falling into shell-holes, heedless of the enemy fire. On one lapel of his tunic the small grenade of the Royal Engineers had survived intact.

“Blown up with some sappers,” he said thickly to our young man, “lookin’ for dressin’ station . . . terrible . . . terrible, . . .” and he reeled onward over the broken earth.

Then came a hurrying, stumbling herd of German prisoners, abject, dishevelled, hands

above their heads, four strapping Guardsmen, each with a helmet hung to his belt, driving them before them, broad grins on their faces.

Now our Ensign had reached the first of those hidden trenches which had brought a burst of unsuspected fire to bear on the advancing Coldstream. The khaki was pretty thick amid the trampled and riven wire, but beyond the *Feldgrauen* lay in heaps, many still wearing the little round caps and the greatcoats in which they had been sleeping, their arms outspread, waxen-faced, limp, and where they lay the brown earth was stained a deeper hue.

A little group came hobbling painfully towards our Ensign as he went up the slope, two Grenadiers carrying one of their officers on a rifle slung between them. They stopped in front of our Ensign.

"Are you in pain?" said our young man to the officer.

"Pretty fair," came from the other's lips.

"Where are you hit?" asked our Ensign.

"Stomach . . . do you know anything about it? These men were going to take me to an aid-post."

"I don't know much about it," said our young man, "but I think you ought to lie quiet for a stomach wound. The Huns are barraging pretty hard back there, and I believe you'd be safer here for a bit in one of these shell-holes."

"Got any brandy?" asked the Grenadier.

"Tea and brandy mixed," replied our Ensign; "but really, you know, you oughtn't to drink, though you're welcome to the lot. Will you have a cigarette? . . . that can't hurt you."

The two Grenadiers had very gently deposited their load in a shell-hole, and one of them, pulling a haversack off a dead man lying on the lip of the crater, put it under the wounded officer's head. Our Ensign gave the wounded man a cigarette, and lit it

for him. The Grenadier puffed for a moment in silence, then said—

“How are things going?”

“Everything looks all right,” replied our young man; “the whole Brigade seems to have walked off the map. I’m trying to catch ’em up . . . there’s a devil of a lot of dead Huns lying around . . . that’s always a good sign. . . .”

“I suppose you’ll have to be going on,” said the wounded man; “take care of yourself, and good luck!”

“So long! I hope you’ll be all right,” said our Ensign, and once more started to clamber up the slope after a glance at his compass to assure himself that he was bearing in the right direction. He kept a sharp look-out ahead to see if he could discern any signs of his own Battalion. He thought he must soon be catching up with them now. . . .

Then, without any warning, he was flung headlong into a shell-hole amid a foul reek of black smoke and a thick cloud of dust.

"That's done it! I'm dead!" was his first thought; but he found himself unwounded at the bottom of the hole, his throat and nose full of dust and his ears singing.

He scrambled out in a panic and dashed on. He caught up with a Guards officer, whose face he seemed to know, leading a party of heavily laden men.

"Are you machine-guns?" he asked the other, as he drew level, . . . his voice sounded very faint in his ears. The other made no reply. Our Ensign repeated his question, and still he got no response. Our young man was feeling dazed and rather cross, and was about to shout his question for the third time, when he observed, greatly to his surprise, that the other officer was speaking to him—that is to say, his lips were moving, but our Ensign heard nothing.

Then the officer put his hands to his mouth and bawled: "I'm—— . . . Stokes

mortars . . . you know me . . . you dined with us the other night!" Our Ensign explained that he had just been blown up . . . and realised that he was almost deaf. Presently their ways parted, and our Ensign was once more trudging on alone.

He crossed a trench where Guardsmen were digging in furiously among a lot of German corpses, passed a Tank on the extreme left, apparently stranded and looking forlorn but intact, met other troops of German prisoners, each bigger than the last, shuffling along at their brisk, characteristic amble, reached the top of the ridge, and plunged into a network of broken barbed wire. There the bullets were humming, and men were shouting and shooting furiously from a crowded trench just in front of him, while in the distance he heard the "tack-tack" of machine-guns and the reverberating explosions of bombs. Bending low our Ensign pelted through the wire, and sprang into a dense throng of men in the trench.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Then was seen with what majesty the British soldier fights. . . ."—NAPIER.

ONCE again our Ensign was in the midst of the Guards — Grenadiers, Coldstream, Irish, . . . remains of half a dozen battalions were there, intermingled with a good sprinkling of men from all manner of line regiments. They stood packed close as herrings in a barrel in the deep and narrow trench, so that it was wellnigh impossible to force a passage. Of officers, for the moment, there was no trace.

Our Ensign stood for a moment to regain his breath and to take in the surroundings. The trench was in a hideous mess, showing

abundant traces of the appalling pounding it had received during three days' incessant artillery fire. The British shells had blown whole segments bodily out of it, so that here the parapet, there the parados, was blasted clean away—sometimes both in the same place—leaving a broad gap void of all protection.

In its time it had been a good specimen of a German fire-trench—in point of fact it was the German main third line—with a neat fire-step, solid traverses, and deep, timber-lined dug-outs with many steps leading sheer down into the bowels of the earth. But now the fire-step was broken and crumbling, the traverses were nearly all blown in, and in many of the dug-outs part of the framework had collapsed, leaving the entrance either sagging or completely blocked up by fallen earth.

The place was a shambles. There were shapeless masses of field-grey trodden down fast into the soft mud bottom of the trench,

and sprawling forms, both khaki and grey, lay all over the place. In a yawning rent in the trench, at our Ensign's very elbow, was the dead body of a lad wearing the black buttons and badges of a Rifle regiment,—a mere boy, with a round bullet-hole in the temple. At his side a figure was sitting, knees drawn up, head resting on the hand, in an attitude of contemplation. Our Ensign recognised a sergeant of his own Battalion . . . an oldish, steady man whom he had known well. . . . So tired and utterly weary was the look on his face, that for the moment the young officer fancied that the man had fallen asleep. But the waxen features told a different tale. . . . Our Ensign's heart sank a little within him as he gazed on the two listless figures: all the morning they remained there, and every time he passed them he felt himself shrinking with horror.

The trench was strewn with "souvenirs"

—German helmets and caps and rifles and greatcoats and ammunition pouches, boxes of cigars, loaves of bread, tins of meat and sardines, empty bottles, letters, pay-books, littered about among the prostrate forms. The men in the trench were turning these over; many had rank German cigars in their mouths. But our Ensign had no time to waste in poring over these things—as the only officer present, he felt that it devolved upon him to try and bring a little order into the chaos.

Presently he espied a familiar form, gaunt and tall,—it was Sergeant Jackson, of our Ensign's company. Briefly, the sergeant gave the officer the news. All the officers of our Ensign's company and the acting company sergeant-major had been knocked out . . . none of the officers were killed, he thought . . . he had seen "the captain" being carried away in all his usual serenity. There were some officers farther along the trench.

Our Ensign bade the sergeant get the men to work in consolidating the position. Now that the trench was in British hands, it had to be reversed, the parapet built up into a parados and a fire-step cut in the parapet.

"The men will have to work like blazes," added our young man; "in a few minutes we shall have every German gun in the place opening on us, and the men will want all the cover they can get."

"And, for Heaven's sake, Sergeant Jackson," he went on, "get some of these bodies put out of the trench!"

Then, with infinite difficulty, our young man started to force himself along the crowded trench. There was no shelling as yet, but there was a lot of machine-gun fire and the air was fairly humming with bullets. He fought his way along desperately hard: the men were willing enough to let him pass, but your Guardsman in full attacking order is a big object that, even edgeways, almost blocks an ordinary trench,

and our Ensign had an exhausting time. As he dragged himself round a traverse, he all but stepped on a German lying on the ground. As he passed him, the man caught hold of the officer's legs and shrieked in a broad Bavarian accent—

“Ach! Herr Leutnant! Ich halt'es nicht aus . . . schiessen Sie mich! Ach! schiessen Sie mich! Ich bitt' Sie!”

The taking of a man's life in cold blood had never entered into our novice's philosophy, so he shook the man off and passed on, with a horrid picture in his memory of a livid, grimacing mask.

Our Ensign next came to a broad gap blown clean through parados and parapet. As he was about to pass, a young Coldstreamer at his elbow pushed past him into the gap. The next moment the lad cried out “Oh!” a loud, gasping exclamation of utter astonishment, spun round, and fell prone at the officer's feet with a great gush of blood that splashed the other's tunic.

“There’s a sniper laying on that gap, sir,” said an Irish Guardsman standing by; “for the love of God, kape your head down!”

“This is a bloody business,” said our Ensign to himself. These ghastly sights were beginning to get on his nerves. Then, ducking down, he darted across the gap and in a minute or two found himself in the presence of Headquarters. The Commanding Officer told him he was to take command of No. 2 Company, as the only officer surviving, and asked for news of the Second-in-command. Our Ensign told his tale.

A group of officers were there: Roderick, tall and quite cool; The Lad, brimming over with excitement, who had drifted in from his battalion, together with his Commanding Officer, a Brigade Machine-Gun Officer, the Doctor, the Padre, a Forward Observation Officer.

Roderick gave our Ensign a brief budget of news. The Don had been shot through the thigh, crossing the ridge; Apollo had

got it through the shoulder, and had last been seen volubly explaining to the stretcher-bearers carrying him down the exact nature of his wound in highly technical language; Duke was all right. Of the officers of the other companies, two at least were known to be killed—Roderick had heard the men talking about them.

One of these two officers was a friend of our Ensign's, yet he heard of his death quite unmoved. In the heat of battle everything appears unreal—so much is rumour, so little is fact; and even towards the concrete realities under his very eyes a man feels that he will wake up and find it all a dream. . . .

One of the group of officers, who was surveying through his glasses the low brown horizon with its tangle of rusted wire, suddenly pointed to the right.

“That communication trench is full of Huns,” he cried; “look! you can see them in their helmets leaning on the parapet!”

Everybody put up their glasses. There,

sure enough, was a long line of heads in coal-scuttle helmets lining the trench indicated. They had a machine-gun trained on the trench where the Guards were; they were also busy sniping into all the gaps.

A Lewis gunner was haled forth from the crowded trench, and he lost no time in laying his gun on the line of Germans. But the gun jammed at the first burst of fire. While they were trying another, our Ensign was ordered to take charge of the left of the line, post sentries, and set every man to the task of consolidating the trench. He was briefly told the situation. On the right, the attacking troops had been held up by the strong position known as The Quadrilateral, bristling with machine-guns, the same guns which had caught the Guards in enfilade as they crossed the ridge; what had happened on the left was not clear.

Our Ensign set off back along the way he had come with a light heart. He rejoiced at having a definite job which

would keep him from thinking about the horrors piling up on every side of him. With him went the Brigade Machine-Gun Officer and a Grenadier Ensign, from whom our young man had once taken over in the trenches in the salient. Of the three officers, only our Ensign was destined to survive the day, but, of course, he did not know that then.

The German, who had clutched at our Ensign's leg on his passage, lay dead in the bottom of the trench. Our Ensign wondered whether the man had found some one to do the service that he refused him. The dead Coldstreamer in the gap had now three companions prone on their faces in the mud.

As they elbowed their way along, the three officers set every man in the trench to the task of consolidation. The men obeyed willingly enough, and the sergeants, at the officers' bidding, posted sentries at intervals along the trench, with strict in-

junctions to keep a sharp look-out, right, left, and centre. Thus the three officers forced their way down the trench, leaving a trail of busy diggers in their wake. By mutual arrangement our Ensign pushed on alone to the extreme left, where he found himself among troops of the line, until he met a very youthful subaltern of a Rifle regiment, whom our Ensign informed of the situation, and of the measures they were taking for their protection. This done, our Ensign toiled his way back again along the trench.

And now the long-expected *strafe* began. A German battery that had been shelling over them shortened its range, and the shells, vicious, black "whizz-bangs," began dropping uncomfortably close to the trench. Word had been coming along from the right, "All men of the such-and-such battalion of the Coldstream to the right," "All men of the such-and-such battalion of the Irish Guards to the right," so the trench

was a little clearer as the different battalions got sifted out. Some kind of advance was going forward to the extreme right. Our Ensign saw long lines of men advancing through a tornado of great, black shell - bursts. Presently a flock of grey figures, hands above their heads, bolted across the open. Shouts rang out all down the trench.

“Shoot the dogs! Lend me your rifle, mate! Let them be! Shoot the ——! Ah, leave them alone!” But no shot fell, and the frightened herd plunged across the broken ground among their own shells, a couple of phlegmatic figures in khaki driving them before them.

The German shell fire was growing in intensity. A 5.9 battery had joined in. The cry of “stretcher - bearER!” ran up and down the trench; here and there men lagged at their digging. Our Ensign had to run up and down, “speeding up” the laggards like a negro slave-driver. But he

noticed many more limp figures, many more ghastly wounds, and every dug-out had its pale and blood-stained occupants. . . .

In all his efforts our Ensign was loyally supported by his own non-commissioned officers and men. The sergeants by word, the men by deed, gave a splendid lead to the reluctant. It is in battle that the sterling loyalty of British troops to their officers comes out strongest.

On his knees at the bottom of the trench, scraping vigorously away with his entrenching tool at the parapet to fashion a fire-step, our Ensign found old Lawson, one of the battalion snipers, the sweat glistening on his face, for by now the sun was shining hotly. By his side stood Sergeant Jackson, as dispassionate as ever.

"We're going to catch it hot here, sir," said the sergeant, with a shake of his head, to our Ensign, who sat down beside the couple and wiped his damp brow. Then, with a shrill scream, a salvo of four shells

burst right over the group ; some one yelled out loud, and a tangle of men fell all over our Ensign as he squatted on the ground, driving his helmet over his eyes. He fought himself clear, and found that all the men about him had stopped working. Some had taken refuge in a low dug-out, where three or four wounded men were sheltering.

Our Ensign rooted them out and set them again to their task. Then he looked about him. Old Lawson, the sniper, lay on his face in the trench, breathing stertorously. Our Ensign turned him over on his back, and saw at a glance that the old soldier was hovering on the brink of eternity. A few yards farther along the trench two men lay dead ; another, with a staring white face, was opening his jacket with trembling, blood - stained hands. A little movement behind him caught our Ensign's ear. He turned and found Sergeant Jackson, his face running with blood, rocking himself gently two and fro. On

the ground beside him was his helmet, with a great jagged rent in the crown.

Our Ensign tore out his last remaining field-dressing and bound up a gaping wound in the sergeant's head. Then he gave him a pull of the famous tea-and-brandy mixture. The sergeant was conscious, but he spoke in a curious, thick fashion.

"I'm all right, sir," he said, "but I don't quite feel up to duty somehow; and I've got a bit of a brow-ache, too!" And then his head fell forward, and with a sharp pang our Ensign thought he was dead. But presently he spoke again, complained that he could not hear, that his eyes were failing; so our Ensign gave him another pull at the water-bottle, and offered him a cigarette, which he took and was able to light alone. The officer left him seated in the trench contentedly puffing, and set off again to keep the men to their task.

And now our Ensign felt the reaction of the morning's excitement coming over him.

All the exhilaration he had experienced in the magnificent opening act of the day seemed to have evaporated. He found himself dwelling with loathing on the mere thought of war; his mind toyed with crude pictures he had seen in German papers of Hindenburg, the German Man of Destiny, striding over mounds of corpses—even such corpses as those that lay strewn all around.

Our Ensign felt his gorge rising at the horrors besetting him. He found himself longing fervently for a mad charge, a German attack,—anything to get away from the shambles, the blood, the mud, the dank smell of the earth, the hideous painted sky that mocked their sufferings. Of all the manifold sensations of the day, the hours he spent in that trench left the deepest impress on our Ensign's memory, and ran their span again and again, with horrors intensified, in the battle-dreams that came to him in many nights subsequently.

In reality, they were not more than three

or four hours in the third German line. To our Ensign the delay seemed endless; the men, too, were chafing to be away "after the Gers.," anything rather than to sit there and be shelled to atoms.

Down the trench our Ensign found the Brigade Machine-Gunner again. The latter told him that apparently the attacking lines, misled by the two trenches which had lain, all unsuspected, between them and their first objective, had believed the trench they were in to be the third objective, whereas it was in reality only the first objective, as far as could be ascertained. In a country from which practically every landmark has been razed, where one trench looks exactly like another, such an error was easily made. Hence the delay. However, the Machine-Gunner said, the first lines had gone on now, and probably the rest would soon follow.

A charming fellow, this Machine-Gunner, practical, conscientious, and fearless beyond

all praise. He and our Ensign found themselves cordially agreed that the sights in that trench were enough to sicken a man of war for the rest of his life.

Then our Ensign suddenly saw his Commanding Officer on the parapet above his head. He ordered our young man to collect all the men he could and bring them forward. Our Ensign and the Machine-Gunner were out of the trench in an instant, bawling to the men to follow them. The men were delighted to get away, and the Machine-Gunner, surrounded by a knot of his men with guns and tripods and ammunition boxes, led a big batch forward, whilst our Ensign ran up and down the trench beating up the rest. And so presently our young Ensign led the way over a wild chaos of broken wire and shell-ploughed brown earth out into the blue, turning his back for ever on that sinister place where, as it seemed to him, years of his life had been spent. On they went, through a few spasmodic shells,

to the top of the low ridge, where an unforgettable sight burst upon their vision.

A broad green valley lay unfolded before them, a beauteous panorama as yet unspoiled by war. Mars had not laid a finger on the long green slopes and smiling valleys. Neat little villages still snuggled intact amid clumps of bosky trees, between them long white ribbons of roads bordered by trim rows of poplars. Here was a pretty hamlet with the glint of red roofs amid the verdant foliage, through which a slender yellow church tower thrust itself up into the azure sky. As though protruding right into the foreground—though in reality it was a mile behind the hamlet—ran a broad white ribbon with a tall fringe of trees, —one of the great national highways of France.

At the first view the whole countryside appeared to slumber in the brilliant sunshine of the Indian summer. Birds were singing in the sky, the trees rustled gently

in the breeze, and the pleasant old church towers dotting the horizon, seen through the shimmering heat haze that arose off the green fields, seemed to nod drowsily as they kept their ancient watch over their little villages.

But there, clearly discernible to the naked eye, along the white patches of distant roads, was a flicker of moving dots which, seen through the glasses, resolved themselves into long lines of men on the march, guns, transport waggons, and the like. Then, in the nearer foreground, where the yellow church tower emerged from the trees, the eye caught a glimpse of figures—here a knot of men streaming away across the fields, there a solitary form strained to an attitude of watching. Over to the right, along a distant road running across the slope of a hill, a limber came galloping; and our Ensign's eyes, following the moving vehicle through the glasses, rested upon a German battery drawn up in the open, an

officer (our Ensign could see his tightly-waisted greatcoat) in the centre, peering through his glasses.

A voice just behind our Ensign exclaimed—

“By God! we’ve got them in the open at last!”

Another cried excitedly—

“Jasus, boys, look at Fritz running away!”

But for the most part the men were silent, standing erect in the open, gazing spellbound at the Promised Land which it had taken two years’ bitter fighting to attain. Thus Cortes and his little band of adventurers may have stood on the Sierra and contemplated with a thrill of mystery the wonder-city of the Aztecs which lay spread out at their feet. There were many Guardsmen in that little band of men from half a dozen Guards’ battalions who had suffered all the bitterness of the retreat from Mons, who had thrilled to the pursuit

of the fleeing enemy from the Marne, and then had undergone the long vicissitudes of trench warfare against a better equipped foe. And now they saw him on the run ! Those veterans must have felt that now they could die content—and many died that day and the next.

That sight banished all thoughts save one from the minds of that thin brown line. Hardly a man there but had his uniform torn and bloody,—not a man but had lost a friend ; since the start at dawn they had had no word from the rear—just a handful of adventurers standing on the fringe of an empty and forsaken stretch of ground. Yet no man heeded any of these things. Operation Orders had said : “The attack will be pushed with the utmost vigour,” and the thought dominating every mind was the determination to drive home to its logical conclusion the victory which that spectacle of rout proclaimed they had won. It was a moment

such as occurs in all great battles . . . on which the memory afterwards loves to linger in the spirit of "what might have been."

The sun was shining, the sky was blue, the birds were singing, the grass was firm and springy underfoot, and the men went forward joyously, all unconcerned at the shells which fell spasmodically about them. They waded through a field of long rank thistles and dried cornstalks reaching up to their middles, and came out on the other side to a low shallow trench, which had apparently been constructed to provide a covered way between the guns of a German battery once posted there. The place was littered with the long wicker-work cases in which the Germans carry their shells, and with brass shell-cases innumerable. One Irish Guardsman found on the ground a very delicate and beautiful telescopic sight for use with a 77-millimetre field-gun in a brown leathern case, and pounced upon it as a "souvenir."

The Machine-Gunner and our Ensign had a brief council of war on the edge of the root-field, and decided to put the men into the shallow trench and set them digging themselves in pending further orders. While the Machine-Gunner began to install his guns in convenient shell-holes, our Ensign spread the men out along the trench until they came in touch with another party of the Guards who were in the same trench. There were one or two officers with them, a couple of Coldstreamers, and a Grenadier captain.

By this time the shelling was growing distinctly unpleasant. Through his glasses our Ensign could clearly see the German battery he had already observed, in action, the men standing to the guns, two officers in flat caps and greatcoats in the middle. The shells were whizz-bangs—shrapnel and high explosive—and they were bursting with unpleasant regularity and disconcerting accuracy up and down the trench line.

Everybody was horribly exposed, and now the disagreeable "swish . . . swish" of some very active machine-guns on the right (in the Quadrilateral, no doubt) blended with the whistle of the shells. Every man in the trench was now working like a Trojan, scraping and hacking away with his entrenching tool in the soft brown soil, and the narrow trench was quite impassable. To get along one had simply to walk across the open and pay no heed to the bullets snapping in the air.

But the excitement of being "in the open" made everybody amazingly callous. The men never ceased working, though here and there hideously mutilated bodies were gently lifted out of the trench and bedded in the thistles, and in places men were shouting, unanswered, the familiar battlefield cry, "Stretcher-bearER!" Officers were walking about in the open, keeping the men to their task, and on the edge of the root-field three Commanding Officers

of the Guards were talking things over, raising their glasses now and then to their eyes, like spectators at an Army point-to-point. They were our Ensign's Commanding Officer, that Commanding Officer of the Coldstream who had that day rallied his men to the note of the silver hunting-horn which our Ensign saw sticking between the buttons of his jacket, and another. Presently, somebody suggested the advisability of taking a little cover, and they adjourned into an adjacent deep shell-hole, where the discussion was resumed. Many days afterwards our Ensign read in a message from 'The Times' war correspondent in France how "at one point in the advance certain Battalion Commanders of the Guards held a conference, which will be historic, in a shell-hole to try and locate precisely where they were."

Near the "historic shell-hole" our Ensign met Duke, an ensign of his own Battalion, one of his own Mess, in a huge

trench - coat. He informed our Ensign that Roderick had been sniped in the trench and badly wounded.

"You and I," he said to our Ensign, "seem to be the only Company Officers left. Everybody else has disappeared. My word! it was hot getting up to that last trench!"

He told our Ensign that El Capitan (who had been left behind when the Battalion went into action) had been sent for after Roderick was hit, and was coming to take over the company.

And here was El Capitan himself, rubbing his hands, bristling with fight.

"We're going on," he grinned; "there's another mixed party of Guards and people in shell-holes a bit down the slope, and we're going to try and join up with 'em!"

Our Ensign's recollections of the rest of that afternoon are rather hazy. He remembers sallying out again with a party of Irish Guardsmen over the coarse yellow

grass towards a long low slope running across from left to right. There came a perfect tornado of German shells and a steady incessant swish of bullets from the machine-guns enflading the slope from the Quadrilateral. Still the line went on, but strangely thinned, as our Ensign noticed in wonder. He remembers seeing little spurts of dust about his feet without understanding what they meant, and asking himself whether the curious whistling noises followed by a metallic whirr were rifle grenades. He caught a glimpse of the Machine-Gun Officer coming out with his men, standing on the slope behind him. When he looked once more he was gone, and our Ensign never saw him again.

All the men were in shell-holes now. Our Ensign toppled breathlessly into one, a shallow crater, where there were two men of the machine-gun team with a gun. The German guns were searching the whole slope with whizz-bangs and those rifle grenades,

or whatever they were, that made that whistling noise and that curious metallic whirr (our Ensign afterwards knew them to be H.E. shrapnel). The shells were bursting everywhere; one could *taste* their sulphur reek, and the ears ached with the perpetual detonations.

The machine-gunners scraped vigorously at the bottom of the hole. It was obviously too small to shelter three, so our Ensign scrambled out and, bending low, darted forward. Once more there was a whirr of bullets. He realised that he must be in full view of some one watching that slope. He dropped into another shell-hole, a much bigger one than the last. A solitary Irish Guardsman was sitting there, phlegmatically scooping himself a little trench with his entrenching tool.

Then our Ensign saw El Capitan striding across the open, his orderly by his side. As our young man watched, he saw the orderly clap his hand to his leg and drop. El Capitan

disappeared into a shell-hole with him and presently emerged alone. Our Ensign shouted to him: the other waved to him to stay where he was, and went striding on calmly back to the trench.

A man dropped heavily on our Ensign and his companion in the shell-hole. He was an Irish Guardsman, too.

"I was in with two chaps in the hole beyant," he panted, "and a shell is after landing on the edge of the hole. It's a wonder that meself's alive, for thim other two is dead!"

"Well, take a hould on your entrinchin' tool," said the other without sympathy, "and dig this out a bit for th' officer!"

While they scraped away our Ensign chatted to the two men. Their talk was all of the "Gerboys harin' off," the number of prisoners they had seen . . . incidents of the day's fighting; of their present position in a shell-hole on a bullet-swept slope with shells bursting all around them they said nothing.

The slope of the ground in front rather masked the view, so our young man resolved to push on a shell-hole or two and try and discover what was happening at the front of the slope. He crawled for a dozen yards, then he heard a shell "coming at him," as the saying is, and he flung himself into the nearest hole. There he found Duke with an ashen face, his jacket split up the back and drenched in blood. With him was his orderly, a big man wearing the D.C.M. ribbon.

"I'm all right," observed the wounded man; "I've got it in the shoulder, I think. They put a shell—shrapnel, I believe it was—right on top of us. Have you got a cigarette to spare?"

Our Ensign looked at his watch. It was four o'clock, a brilliant autumn afternoon, full of light and colour. He found it quite impossible to realise that it was on the cards that none of them would ever get out of that hole alive. But the oddness of their

situation tickled his sense of humour, and he remarked upon it as he handed his fellow-ensign his cigarette-case.

Thus they sat for fully an hour and a half. By that time our Ensign and the orderly had dug the shell-hole into quite a respectable trench. They had to work with great circumspection, for the least movement attracted a shower of projectiles in their direction. Otherwise, the enemy seemed loth to waste ammunition; when the surface of the slope was unruffled the guns were silent.

No word came up from the trench behind them, meanwhile, and at half-past five our Ensign thought he had better go back and find out what was happening. He promised to send out the stretcher-bearers to fetch in Duke as soon as darkness fell. Then he crawled cautiously back, noticing on his way that the shell-hole in which he had first taken shelter now held two corpses and a wrecked machine-gun.

CHAPTER XV.

ON returning to the trench, our Ensign found that, during his absence, the men had dug a foot or so down and had fashioned a rude kind of fire-step. Their numbers had been increased by the arrival of two more officers of our Ensign's Battalion with mixed parties of Guards. These two officers had been having an exhilarating time bombing the enemy out of the right of the third German line. Our Ensign found all the surviving officers of his Battalion—with the Commanding Officer, the Doctor, and the Padre, seven in all—installed in a sort of small observation trench (probably dug originally for the officers of the German battery

installed there). Several of the party were busy deepening the trench with pick and entrenching tool, but others were looking through their glasses at the slopes to the right of the yellow church tower where strange doings were toward.

Word had been brought in from the small party of Guards and other units holding the most advanced line that the Germans were massing for a counter-attack. Through his glasses our Ensign could clearly descry dense parties of men advancing in artillery formation on the distant slopes bathed in the mellow evening sunshine, while on the roads transport waggons, artillery limbers, and even motor-buses were to be seen rolling up. The situation was desperate enough. The Guards were still without word from the rear, without any known support, without any definite connection either right or left, without machine-guns, for the last team had been knocked out that afternoon, without Verey lights for the

approach of darkness, or any material to put the trench in a proper state of defence. If the Germans attacked it would have to be a fight to a finish, for, of course, there was no idea of falling back. Our Ensign noticed the Commanding Officer, who was perfectly cheerful and entirely confident, examining the chamber of his revolver.

Then, over to the right, a sudden German barrage with nasty, black 5·9 shells, began with unexpected violence. Through the high-spouting shell-bursts a steady line plodded forward and the word flashed along the line—

“The Scots Guards are attacking!”

Onward they went in the failing light, tall figures swallowed up in black masses of smoke, men flung this way and that, ducking, stumbling, falling. Suddenly our Ensign, watching through his glasses, saw an officer he knew well topping the skyline,—a shell burst quite close to the familiar figure—he shot up an arm to protect his

face, then plunged forward again and was lost to view in the eddying smoke and the gathering dusk. Then the line was slowly swallowed up, and only the shells remained to bar the advance of supports.

The day died reluctantly, sullenly, and the temperature began to sink. Our Ensign, who had been doing his share of the digging, suddenly remembered that he had had no lunch. He looked for his orderly, a man he had got in the last line to take the place of the wounded MacFinnigan, but he was nowhere to be seen, vanished in the smoke of battle together with our Ensign's haversack containing his sandwiches. However, El Capitan came to the rescue with a hunk of bread and tongue and a bar of chocolate, which, together with a draught of the famous tea-and-brandy mixture, gave our young man a satisfying meal. As he was eating he saw the stretcher-bearers arriving with Duke, with whom the Doctor immediately busied himself.

It was almost dark when an Irish Guards sergeant arrived with the news that the Germans were still massing to attack. Our Ensign never forgot the sight of that man, a big Celtic type with fine eyes, a blood-stained bandage round his head, very white against his black hair. He had come from the mixed party still holding out in the most advanced line. Having delivered his message, he went forth once more into the dusk . . . and was never seen again. Thus do men vanish in battle.

The counter-attack never came. Long after the German star-shells had begun spouting, long after the survivors of the party in the most advanced line and of the detachment which had gone forward in the afternoon had been withdrawn, the Guards remained on the *qui vive*. Our Ensign and his brother ensigns divided the night into watches, and took turns to spend three hours in the raw air with the line of outposts which the Guards threw out in front

of their trench. That night, at last, they got touch with a line battalion on the left, and on the right with another battalion of Guards.

When our Ensign returned to the trench on being relieved on outpost duty . . . it was about midnight . . . feeling very cold and utterly weary, he found an unwonted stir there. Rations and water had come up and were being distributed among the men. Nor had the officers been forgotten. Three servants had accompanied the ration party and brought food and drink for the officers, also the letters. Loud were the praises of the Quartermaster sung that night, for it was a great feat. All day the Battalion had been marooned, yet, with the coming of night, the rations arrived in spite of Heaven knows what difficulties to be surmounted on the way up. There were three letters for our Ensign, and the first he opened was a bill from a London florist! That ^vthin sheet of paper, with its elabor-

ately engraved heading, brought home vividly to him the extraordinary contrasts in which war abounds,—at one moment cowering in a shell-hole, with death busy all about; the next moment back again in the old routine of life, with letters and newspapers . . . and bills! Thus our Ensign pondered as he devoured cold tongue and bread and biscuits, and sipped some excellent claret out of an enamel mug, at his feet El Capitan and the Padre snoring peaceably.

When the first streaks of another dawn appeared in the sky, the outpost line was withdrawn and the men came trudging back to the trench, muddy, red-eyed with want of sleep, transpierced with cold. Our Ensign watched the morning creeping rosy-fingered into the sky, and idly wondered what the day would bring forth. During the night, apparently, the British artillery had profited by the deep stretch of ground won from the enemy, for, as soon as it was

light, some vicious little field-pounders began barking very close up behind the Guardsmen's position. Then a few British aeroplanes hummed out into the clear morning sky and flew away. Not long after a regular covey of German machines sallied out and hovered above the Guards, cramped up in their shallow and altogether unprotected trench.

"Now we shall catch it," thought our Ensign, and catch it they did. It was mostly shrapnel, H.E. shrapnel, black and vile-smelling, with a deafening detonation, that the Hun sent over, reserving his heavier stuff for the little battery behind, which barked incessantly notwithstanding. The German shooting was bad, and the shells fell short of or over the trench. Several shrapnel bursts clanged and whizzed and pattered round the heads of the officers as they sat in the bottom of their corner of the trench, but they had no casualties. In fact, although the shelling went on at

intervals all through the day, the casualties were few.

But it was an arduous time. There was no means of proceeding along the trench, for it was far too crowded, and, indeed, there was no object in doing so. One could only sit there and attempt the impossible—namely, to pay no heed to the shells. The little group of officers was strangely isolated, for there was no movement to be observed, either before or behind them. The ground in the rear was in full view of the enemy, so communication with the troops in the line behind was cut off during the daylight hours. It all gave our young man a queer sort of “desert island” sensation, and he kept on thinking of the shipwrecked pleasure party in “The Admirable Crichton.”

Some of the officers slept, others ate, others took turns at assisting the orderlies to deepen still further the trench, the bottom of which was found to consist of live German shells in their wicker cases. One of

the orderlies, stoutly wielding a pick, made this interesting discovery, upon which the pick was unanimously disqualified, and only very gentle scraping with the entrenching tool allowed. Our Ensign slept a little and ate a little and drank a little, and then did a thing he had never done before, being a strict Tory, . . . he read 'The Daily News' from cover to cover—leading articles, Women's Page, advertisements, and all, and then passed it on to somebody else, who did the same. It was the only newspaper in the trench.

But the green panorama stretched out before them was not without its compensations either. Ever since the previous afternoon the British Heavies had played a wonderful game with the pretty little hamlet with the yellow church tower peering forth from among the trees. Huge projectiles whooshed noisily through the air, and hurled destruction among the red roofs and the verdant foliage. A great pall of smoke,

flanked by spouts of black and brown earth, and topped with eddies of coral-pink haze, was the last that our Ensign had seen of the little village by daylight. At night, as he went round the outposts, however, he had still heard the great shells crashing into the village, and watched a house blaze heavenwards with a glare that lit up the surrounding spouts of smoke. In the first light of morning he had seen the yellow church tower but a single ragged stick of broken masonry amid a tangle of broken trees and gaping roofs. And still the shells went pounding in. Ah, the guns of the Somme—they do their work thoroughly !

It is not often in this war of trenches that a man can get a comprehensive view of an attack. To the little group of officers, cooped up in their narrow trench, was vouchsafed that morning as grandiose a spectacle as (our Ensign believes) any man has witnessed in this war. Somewhere about the hour of half-past nine a light

infantry brigade over on the left attacked, and from their "grand stand," as the men, delighted, called it, the Guards could see every detail of the advance. It was a sight, too, to gladden brave men's eyes! For though the little lines of brown dots that went creeping forward up the distant green slopes were swept away again and again, while across the valley echoed the loud stutter of the German machine-guns, yet the succeeding lines went on. The tiny brown figures seemed literally to be blown down, yet others struggled forward, wave upon wave, until they were lost to view. Through the glasses one could see the wake they had left—little figures crawling about, hobbling, with the stretcher-bearers darting and ducking and dodging to and fro. Once a figure detached itself from the advancing line, right in the teeth of that whirlwind of death, bent over a prostrate figure, picked it up, and started to struggle along . . . probably towards the shelter of a shell-hole. But,

even as our Ensign watched, with bated breath, the little brown figure and his burden rolled over and lay still.

All the valley now re-echoed to the roar of artillery, and the Germans left the Guards alone while they concentrated on the attacking forces. The British supports were seen coming up through a heavy barrage, then men began to trickle back down the slope strewn with brown figures left in the trail of the advance. What had happened? No one knew. Had the attack failed? None could say. Little by little the artillery fire slackened, some inquisitive aeroplanes came out and hovered over the scene, and, by-and-by, the noise and the smoke subsided. Then, after a pause, the enemy turned his attention to the Guards, and started his intermittent bombardment again.

In the course of the day word at last came up from the rear. The Guards were to maintain their position, and might be

called upon to support an attack. In the afternoon the troops on the left went forward again to the attack, but the wind blew the smoke across the field of vision, and the Guards could not exactly see what was going forward. Germans, however, could still be discerned in and about the ruined village.

Towards dusk that evening our Ensign and a Grenadier officer took a party of men and raided some *chevaux de frise*—trestles garnished with barbed wire—which the lynx eye of our Ensign's Commanding Officer had noticed in front of a German trench in their rear. This was lifted bodily in sections, and put out in front of the trench to furnish some slight measure of protection in the event of a German attack.

Night fell again, dank and cold, with a menace of rain. Still there was no word of relief. How distant seemed that fresh dawn when, under the paling stars, the Guards had gone forward to the attack!

Everybody was worn out. Excitement, fatigue, want of sleep, had done their work. But no respite could be granted. Again, at nightfall, the line of outposts was posted; and again the ensigns, haggard and scrubby, did a shift each in turn. The men were so utterly exhausted that they literally could not keep their eyes open as they lay crouching in their shell-holes in pairs, their faces towards the spouting German lights, their backs towards the blackness of their trench. Our Ensign, moving continually during his turn of duty to keep himself awake, had to go from shell-hole to shell-hole and assure himself that the sentries were watchful by kicking the soles of their boots.

While our Ensign was out during the hours before midnight, in company with one of his sergeants, he managed to get in touch with the troops who had made the gallant attacks that morning and afternoon. In a sunken road which had been

wrested from the enemy, and was strewn with German and British dead, he found the wounded laid out in long lines of stretchers, moaning, shivering with cold, pathetically asking for cigarettes—a thing he could not give them. They were waiting their turn to be carried down over the broken and shell-swept ground to the rendezvous of the field ambulances, a mile or so back.

In a German dug-out our Ensign found two battalion commanders supping off bread and chocolate and a drain of whisky in a bottle, with them two or three young officers. They were all mud-stained and worn, but they made our Ensign welcome and offered him a share in their drain of whisky. They told our Ensign they were momentarily expecting to be relieved, and promised to inform their successors of the Guards' line of outposts, so that they could join up with the Guards.

When our Ensign got back to the trench,

he heard glad tidings: the Guards were to be relieved that night. It was half-past one in the morning, but there were no signs of the relief as yet; and presently our Ensign was sent out again with another party of men to strengthen the outpost line, for there were rumours of a German attack to be delivered at two o'clock.

Once more the weary men, many of whom had already been three hours on outpost duty that night, fared forth into the blackness in a smother of rain. The night was very dark, and it was hard work getting the men out of the trench and lined up, for they were heavy with sleep. Perhaps this operation created an undue amount of noise; but the fact remains that hardly had our Ensign led them into the open than a perfect storm of German bullets came over—machine-guns stuttered loudly, and a great shower of German lights soared up into the sky.

Everybody flung himself flat on his face, our Ensign reflecting that the enemy seemed to anticipate a further British attack rather than to contemplate launching one himself. Presently the storm abated, and our Ensign rose to his feet. But the man at his side did not stir. Bending down, our Ensign shaded his lamp with his hand and flashed the light for an instant on to the prostrate figure. It was our Ensign's orderly—his third since the attack started—lying dead on his back with a bullet through the head. He was the only casualty.

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The cold night was all but spent, and the sky was slowly changing to the play of the approaching day, when, from out of a scene of some bustle about the trench, word came to our Ensign to bring the outposts in . . . the reliefs had arrived. Never was relief effected more swiftly. It went at a whirlwind pace. Stiff and aching, the outposts stumbled in and were pushed

by their comrades into their places in the sadly shrunk companies of the Battalion; a blur of figures groped their way into the trench, a couple of infantry subalterns emerged and reported to the Commanding Officer, . . . how fresh they looked, thought our Ensign. . . .

Then a German shell screamed over and burst noisily, scattering a pailful of shrapnel about: another followed, and another. The sky is flushing with the coming of the sun: every moment the light grows brighter. Hurry, hurry, or the Huns will finish off even that wasted shadow of a battalion before it clears the ridge. What are they waiting for in front? Clang . . . whee . . . ee . . . oo . . . oo! goes the shrapnel. Why the devil don't they move on? Crash! there falls another shell. . . .

But the leading company is off at a good steady amble, the rest of the Battalion at its heels, each company commander taking the shortest way that will bring his men

out of the zone of visibility behind the shelter of the ridge. Away they go, across the German third line, where the only Guards left now are the dead, and muffled figures are frying bacon over little wood fires,—past shell-holes tenanted by stiff forms, over roads strewn with field-grey corpses and littered with the jumble of the battlefield, down the slope back to life and air and safety, where the larks are singing in the pellucid sky, where the gunners are clinking dixies as they come and go about their breakfast—past a smashed gun here and a wrecked horse ambulance there, and so on to a road where signallers and sappers and R.A.M.C. orderlies, washing and shaving and breakfasting in the bright sunshine, wave an encouraging hand as the Guards go by.

There, in an open space by a wood, spruce figures—the officers and non-commissioned officers who had been left behind—are moving in and out of the muddy, dishevelled Guardsmen grouped about the

smoking cookers. Peter is there, and all the others; and there, too, is the faithful Johnson, waiting with our Ensign's cap and a discreetly murmured "Glad to see you all right, sir!" There also the Mess Sergeant, pink and perspiring, darting to and fro among a cloud of servants busy over a white cloth spread on the ground ready for breakfast. The grateful smell of breakfast is in the air and the buzz of many voices—but all the movement stops, all the voices are hushed, as the Battalion, much-reduced in strength, marches in, forms up, and is dismissed by the Commanding Officer. Then the buzz of voices breaks forth again, hearty greetings are exchanged, there is much hand-shaking, while the company officers, their company sergeant-majors by their sides, run about and see that the men get their breakfast.

Half an hour later our Ensign sank down beside the white table-cloth. The craving for warm food was uppermost, stronger even

than the desire to sleep, . . . it was a Gargantuan meal in the sunshine. Whilst he ate, he heard of the fortunes of the fight, the fine advance made, the numbers of prisoners captured, the success of the French, the losses, the death of this friend and of that, the condition of the wounded, . . . but it made no impression on his mind at the time. He was too tired, his mind was too benumbed by the sensations he had experienced, to grasp or to realise anything.

Then, finally, came the march back to camp, the drums of the Battalion at the head. They followed that self-same road by which our Ensign had seen the remnants of the Irish Division coming out of action a week or so before. The men held themselves erect, and stepped out well to the roll of the drums and the squeal of the fifes, which brought out on to the roadside banks men from batteries, bivouacs, and horse-lines all around. Near the camp the Brigadier met them and walked a part of

the way beside the Commanding Officer, sitting his horse at the head of the column.

And so, to the lilt of the regimental quickstep, they came to a great city of canvas spread out upon a breezy hillside, and marched in to rest through lines of other Guardsmen, like them, just out of action, who smiled them a welcome through the grime on their faces.

CHAPTER XVI.

"The moving finger writes ; and, having writ,
 Moves on : nor all thy piety nor wit
 Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
 Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it."

—OMAR KHAYYÁM.

THE morrow of battle is worse than battle itself, worse even than the eve. For, when the weary body has been rested, the dazed brain begins to reassert itself, and the flood of realisation pains like the rush of blood to a numbed limb. The empty messes, the missing faces, the shrunken appearance of the battalion when the roll is called, the pile of kits lying ownerless outside the Quartermaster's store . . . each of these visible signs of the battalion having passed

through the fire the mind takes in, reluctantly and recoiling from each fresh shock. In sleep it revives shudderingly every phase of the fight, and, liberated from the shackles of the will, lying powerless in the ban of slumber, suffers unresisting, a thousand times intensified, every torment of fear and horror which the waking mind has suppressed. For dreams—so the psychologists tell us—are but the expression of emotions consciously or subconsciously held in restraint in the waking hours.

Tents, as far as the eye could see, pitched in a sea of mud, ruffled by chill gusts of rain and wind sweeping across the slopes; a mammoth gun belching forth green fire and yellow smoke a few hundred yards away, the thunder of distant cannon, blending with the stir of the camp; drums beating, pipes skirling from the lines of the Scots Guards, the solemn harmony of men's voices singing hymns (only the Welsh Guards possessed a choir like that!) . . . these

were the sights and sounds to which our Ensign awoke from his first troubled sleep after getting back to camp.

He came to his senses with a start of terror that sent him flying to the tent door. Hideous nightmare shapes were haunting the tents and huts where officers and men of the Guards slept the sleep of utter exhaustion, physical and mental, the terrifying spectres that drift through the battle-dreams of men who have been in action. Until our Ensign had gazed long upon the lines of tents swaying in the wind, and had seen the familiar khaki figures, wrapped in their waterproof capes, passing to and fro in the mud, his mind remained in the grip of a nameless terror: he did not know who or where he was, whether he were alive or dead, on earth or in space. Thus do men awake from their first sleep after coming out of battle.

For a few instants he felt like one raised from the dead. Slowly and painfully his

mind picked up, one by one, the threads of his life where it seemed to have left off on that sunny morning—surely it was years ago?—when the whistles had sounded, the hurricane din had broken loose, and the Guards had moved forward into battle.

But there across the tent lay Peter's sleeping valise and things: there, on the tent pole, hung the little mirror they shared in common. The tent was dry and clean: the yellow light diffused through its canvas sides was bright and comforting. And here was the faithful Johnson, getting ready his bath and a complete change of clothing, and collecting his torn and blood-stained uniform for the battalion tailor to mend and scour.

Lazily our Ensign fished a box of cigarettes from his kit spread out beside him, lit one, and lying back in his warm sleeping-bag, watched the smoke curl upwards towards the peaked dome of the tent. He was stiff all over, every bone in his body was aching, but he was conscious of a deep

sense of thanksgiving; he was overpoweringly glad to be back in the world again.

They had to carry on. He had a pang when he found all those joyous company Messes he had known shrunk to a group of officers small enough to take their meals together at one short table. He would not let himself think of the old double-company Mess, for only he and two others survived—all the rest were casualties. “*Der Mann stirbt*,” says the old German maxim, “*das Regiment bleibt*,” and the old Battalion routine continued unbroken. The Battalion had to be remade, companies re-shuffled, new non-commissioned officers appointed, casualty lists made up, names sent in for decorations, and with it all the old duties to be done—rifle inspections and rum issues and all the rest. The very matter-of-factness of this resumption of the old life hurt a little sometimes, but the work of the Army, like the Government of the realm, brooks no interruption.

Drafts arrived to fill up the gaps in the ranks of the Battalion. They saw the first batch of these parading one angry and lowering autumn evening as they trooped back through the mud and rain from the little cemetery in the centre of the camp, where they had laid to rest a brother officer . . . a plain rite with no other ceremonial than that with which the simple majesty of the Burial Service invests the humblest obsequies, with the rain blowing damp upon their bare heads, and the guns of the Somme growling in the distance.

Truly the Regiment is a thing immortal.

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But even in the midst of the work of reorganising the Battalion, rumours began to circulate that the Guards, like other Divisions, were going to have "a second helping" of the great offensive. There was a plain hint of this intention in the very stirring message of congratulation which the Brigadier sent to the Battalion for their

achievements on September 15: "You may be called upon in the near future," the passage ran, "to carry out similar work, and I know that you will not fail."

Of course they would not, but the news created something akin to dismay amid the little band of survivors of the great advance—not from any reluctance to play a man's part again, but from apprehension as to how the strong leaven of untried recruits in their ranks would withstand the fury of a modern battle as their first taste of active service. Events were to prove how utterly groundless these apprehensions were, but there was a pretty general feeling at the time that it was hard luck for the Battalion's fine fighting reputation to be thus staked on the untested quality of new drafts.

Moreover, this time it was the turn of our Ensign's Battalion to lead the attack. Everybody was going in: and our Ensign found himself back with his company, as second in command to Peter and the only

other officer in the company. Nos. 1 and 2 companies were to furnish the first "waves" of the assault.

One afternoon the Corps Commander rode over to the camp, and from his horse told the officers of our Ensign's Battalion, assembled in a semicircle, what was expected of the Battalion, and why. In a few very brief but very lucid words he explained the higher strategy of the Somme offensive, which the general public was to learn three months' later from Sir Douglas Haig's memorable despatch, and assured them that what the great British artillery superiority on the Somme could do to lighten their task would be done in a measure that should surpass anything the Germans had yet experienced in the way of bombardments. Then, wishing them all good luck, he rode away, and in simple language, such as soldiers understand, addressed the non-commissioned officers to the same effect. And that simple, straightforward talk was

like a searchlight that picked out and held in its bright beam the word "Duty," which is engraved in every soldier's mind.

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So, on a wet, dark evening, the Battalion marched back again to that little copse where in the dug-out "The Last Supper of the Girondins" had taken place. The roads had suffered terribly from the combined effects of the rain and the heavy traffic of the recent advance. They had been churned into deep quagmires of glutinous mud, where guns and limbers and G.S. waggons kept on getting bogged, where the men sank in above the middle of their puttees at every step.

What with the darkness and the mud and the frequent blocks owing to vehicles sticking fast in the slime, the traffic was in a state of chaos. The rain pelted down unmercifully, and it was so dark that a man could not distinguish the features of his neighbour in the ranks. Reliefs and fatigue

parties, passing to and from the front line, got inextricably mixed up. Men lost touch, and amid the curses of the drivers as they urged their exhausted horses or mules through the deep bog of the road, echoed cries such as: "Fatigue party this way!" "All Welsh Guards to move forward"; "Make way there! Stretcher-bearers!" while the rain splashed sorrowfully down and the air trembled to the thundering crash of the guns all around.

The Battalion took about four hours to march the few miles separating their last camp from the copse, and when they finally got in they were all drenched and liberally besmeared with mud. A rum issue warmed them a little, and then once more the men set about scraping themselves dry spots in the crumbling shell-holes and building shelters out of the litter of branches and shell-baskets and corrugated iron sheeting scattered about the copse.

Their labours proved to be in vain, for at

luncheon the next day a baby-faced infantry subaltern walked up to the officers' mess and very diffidently suggested that the Battalion was occupying his battalion's billet. The Brigade was consulted and gave the verdict in favour of the Line, so that afternoon the Battalion moved to another portion of the wood, where, in a number of German dug-outs, all more or less battered, and in shell-holes, they managed to make themselves fairly comfortable. With the aid of the mess-servants, the officers managed to put a fairly large dug-out into a state of repair, thatching the holes in the roof with sandbags filled with earth, laid across iron girders, and building up the gaps in the back of the shelter with sheets of corrugated iron which one of the orderlies found lying in the wood. The floor was carpeted with clean sandbags, a table was knocked together and a line of seats constructed out of filled sandbags. A brazier of glowing coals was placed in the doorway, for the nights were very cold, and

thus they managed to install themselves with some measure of comfort.

The men displayed extraordinary ingenuity in the little bivouacs and earths they constructed out of their waterproof sheets and all kinds of odd material. Fortunately the weather improved, and the sun came out hot in the daytime, though the air got very cold after nightfall.

Early each morning the companies were taken out by an officer and given half an hour's physical drill in the bright sunshine—either a little doubling (which was a matter of some difficulty, as the slopes on which they exercised were pitted with shell-holes) or leap-frog or follow-my-leader. In the afternoons there were fatigues to be done, mostly salvage fatigues, to clear that littered brown slope over which the Guards had advanced.

Until he had superintended one of these salvage parties, our Ensign had had no idea of the extraordinary quantity and variety of

articles with which a battlefield is strewn. The men of the party—generally 100 strong—were spread out over the area designated by the Brigade to be cleared, and ordered to bring in every single article they found, no matter what it was, and deposit their burdens at a salvage-dump which had been formed by the roadside. At the dump lay in huge piles rusty rifles, both British and German, bayonets and equipment and great-coats the same, khaki caps and German helmets, boxes of ammunition and bombs, thousands of rounds of ammunition, parts of machine- and Lewis guns and trench mortars, field-dressings in their neat brown cases, and all kinds of unused rations. All the dead that had strewn the slope had, by this time, been covered in, and the articles which the salvage parties brought by the hundred to the dump were merely the superficial litter of the battlefield.

Altogether the Battalion spent four days in the wood. For the greater part of the

time they were shelled—an utterly haphazard, sporadic bombardment, with large black 5·9 shells. In comparison with their noise and number, the projectiles did very little damage, but they gave the survivors of the 15th of September an insight into the quality of the new drafts. One of these shells exploded in the middle of the night, with a crash that shook the wood, within a score of yards of a leafy shelter beneath which three of the recruits were sleeping. But, as the Company Sergeant-Major informed our Ensign in accents of admiration afterwards, the three recruits merely turned over on their sides and went to sleep again.

It was 9 o'clock in the evening of September 24 when the Battalion started out for the trenches from which the attack was to be delivered the next day, at 12.35 P.M. instead of the more customary early hour. Our Ensign's company led off, and as both officers had been over the route they found their way safely to the rendezvous, a Tank

stranded on the plain, where the guides sent by the battalion they were relieving met them. The night was as dark as pitch and the German guns most unpleasantly active; in fact, as soon as they had topped the ridge—a long winding caterpillar of silent marching figures—high-explosive shrapnel began to burst about them with unpleasant force and in dangerous proximity.

Our Ensign marked down their experiences of that night in his diary as “the most beastly night I ever remember.” Men marching at night are always inclined to hurry the pace when they come under shell fire, and as the going was very bad over the loose and crumbling shell-holes, the rear of the company, where our Ensign was, had considerable difficulty in keeping touch with the head. Night after night parties of Germans walked into the British lines, for in the devastated country where most trenches were merely lines of shell-holes connected up, there were no landmarks to guide one.

Once touch were lost with the head of the column and the guide, our Ensign knew that he and his men stood a very good chance of landing themselves in the German lines.

There was a communication trench, but it was full of water, so the companies went up over the open. Several times they had to cross the trench in its windings, and each time our Ensign had to help his heavily-laden men to leap the yawning gulf, and then urge them forward at the double to catch up with the rest of the party disappearing into the gloom.

At length they reached their destination—a very narrow, shallow trench dug in the soft brown earth on the grassy downward slope of a low ridge, the German star-shells spouting from the flat ground below them. The trench was so narrow that the reliefs had to stand on the edge until the battalion occupying it had scrambled out. There were no dug-outs or shelters of any kind—save

that, here and there, men had scraped long shelves in the back wall. The only fire-step was a series of rough embrasures scooped at intervals in the forward wall; parapet there was none, for the edge of the trench was practically flush with the ground.

The relief was accomplished with remarkable alacrity, as reliefs in such circumstances generally are, and the outgoing battalion hurried helter-skelter away into the darkness amid a rain of shells. The only means of communication between one end of that crowded trench and the other was by walking along the top. Luckily, as the night advanced, the Hun became quieter, so Peter and our Ensign made their way to the end of their section of the trench and verified their connection with the other Guards battalion which was to attack the next day on their right, and got back unscathed to the officers' corner of the trench.

There they found El Capitan and his ensign who were to take No. 1 Company "over the top" in the morning. The only accommodation was a long shelf cut in the wall of the trench which would shelter two sitting or one lying, and a niche, scooped out of the back wall about level with their waists, which they used as a table.

Throughout the long cold hours until daylight the officers took it turn and turn about to watch, whilst the remaining three sought slumber in the sand-hole or on the floor of the trench. But sleep was out of the question, for once below the level of the ground, by some trick of acoustics, the air trembled so violently with the crash of the guns that the ear-drums positively ached. All night the Germans shelled them in desultory fashion, the shells ploughing up and down the trench but never in it, and the only casualties they sustained were in

a luckless water fatigue party. All night the British artillery pounded away at the German lines, cleaving a passage by which the Guards would advance in the noonday hours.

Morning broke—the morning of September 25—pearly and fresh and delightful, and from the shallow trench the officers surveyed the objectives of the coming attack set in a landscape whose perfect serenity was marred only by the gleaming shell-bursts that dotted it everywhere. They saw the long gash in the brown shell-ploughed soil which marked the trench, their first objective; beyond it the village, embowered in foliage, swathed in coral-pink and saffron smoke . . . a yellow, jagged fragment of church tower, a glimpse of long skeleton roofs and of gaping white walls . . . with the capture of which their day's work would be done.

By some miracle of organisation servants

turned up with breakfast, and the four officers munched cold bacon and bread-and-butter and hard-boiled eggs, and drank scalding-hot tea whilst they studied the scene before them. Aeroplanes—British, of course: the Hun variety was a rarity on the Somme in those days—soared out into the cloudless sky, and fussed about over the German lines amid woolly-white shell-bursts, whilst the German trenches broke their silence with the vicious stutter of machine-guns.

All the time the British shells screamed overhead and burst with vast brown earth-spouts and creamy belches of smoke about the trench and the village. Up and down that first objective they went, now flinging high into the air great beams of wood and other dark objects that might have been human limbs, now sending up merely a low billow of dust and smoke, showing that the projectile had fallen plumb into the trench.

In the village the shells crashed and thundered and sent great masses of masonry and woodwork flying, and once, after a burst of pink smoke had cleared away, our Ensign saw that the jagged finger of church tower had vanished.

CHAPTER XVII.

“ But, by the Mass ! our hearts are in the trim ! ”—*Henry V.*

THE noonday sun was high overhead. The long hand of the watch was passing the half-hour mark after noon. The first wave of Guards was waiting for the whistle-blast that would launch them to the attack, rifle and bayonet in their hands, helmets strapped on tight, and one foot in the little steps they had cut in the forward wall of the trench. The men of the second wave stood, likewise ready, leaning with their backs to the parados, to let the first wave get clear.

Peter and our Ensign were in the middle of the trench, girt about with revolvers and

lamps and compasses, helmets back to front so as to hide their regimental crest that would proclaim them as officers, coat collars turned up, and rifles by their sides. Peter was on the fire-step, for he was to lead the first wave: a spin of the coin had decided it: our Ensign leant against the back of the trench, and both had their eyes glued to their left wrists, watching the long hand of their watches crawling forward to the appointed hour.

“Now!” cried Peter.

“Now!” echoed the other, and even as the first wave scrambled out, the roar of the guns increased to whirlwind intensity, and all the stretch of No Man’s Land in front of them began to seethe yet more madly with the bursting shells.

Away the solid brown line goes, a zig-zagging line of figures, diminishing to right and left into mere dots, slowly, slowly, for they must not walk into that creeping hurricane which is sweeping the ground as

they go forward. The noise is terrific, a vast cascade of reverberating crashes blending with the swift, incessant, wingèd scream of heavy metal hurtling through space, the only ingredient sound distinguishable, the high-pitched whinny and spit of bullets in the air.

No whistle could be heard in such a din, and with the drill-book signal for "Advance"—the right arm stretched forward and dropped—our Ensign got his second wave out of the trench into the screaming, vibrating atmosphere of No Man's Land.

How the men responded to that signal! Never a laggard was there. Out they scrambled and staggered and hopped,—it is no easy thing for a big man, heavily laden, to get out of a narrow trench,—eager and willing and determined, one helping the other, spreading out to the proper extended distance, and dressing by the right as calmly as if they were out on a company training day at home. Out they came with a will,

thankful to exchange their narrow quarters in the trench for the freedom of the advance.

Over the top! Has any man's life ever offered such a thrill, such a sensation of freedom, such a bursting from incarceration into liberty, from darkness into light, as that inspiring leap into the open? Gone the uneasiness, the doubtings of the eve—only the great moral uplifting, which the din of battle brings, remains.

Slowly the line surged forward across the broken ground towards the long ragged fringe of red-rusted wire running in front of the German trench. The second wave soon caught up with and merged in the first, and the whole line went on together, Peter and our Ensign and the Company Sergeant-Major darting to and fro to restrain the eagerness of the men, and prevent them from plunging into that maelstrom of fire that crept forward yard by yard in front of them.

The advance was so leisurely that our

Ensign had plenty of time to look about him. He saw with some surprise—so slow is the mind to take in the reality of death—how here a man and there a man would suddenly stop and throw himself down with a deliberation that would have excited the ire of a stage manager rehearsing a death scene. He gazed with astonishment on the secrets which that serene and silent stretch of ground, as viewed from their trench, now abruptly revealed, — waxen and sorrowful corpses in clean field-grey overcoats sprawling in shell-holes, the victims of that morning's bombardment; wounded Guardsmen waiting, with that dumb apathy which is such a fine characteristic of our British wounded, for the stolid and dauntless stretcher-bearers.

A brace of partridge suddenly whirled up from the broken and splintered festoons of wire at their very feet. Our Ensign watched them fly off to the left, and noted that they came unscathed through the torrent of fire.

The men laughed uproariously at the appearance of the birds,—it takes but very little to set men laughing in battle.

Now they were at the wire which reached to the very lip of the German trench, all battered and pounded. Already frightened faces appeared, mouthing from under the ugly German coal-scuttle helmets their cry of “Kamerad! Kamerad!” The whole line burst into a wild “whoroo”: the yell echoed up and down the line, and even rang out above the din of the fight. Then, like a torrent, the khaki flood poured into the trench.

From the top of the trench our Ensign surveyed its length. Germans scuttled out of dug-outs, running this way and that uncertainly, like trapped rats—then seeing the khaki surging down upon them, flung away their rifles and threw up their hands, bleating “Kamerad! Kamerad!”

What a sight that trench was! The dead were lying everywhere—stamped or blown

into the soft mud bottom, sprawling at the mouths of the dug-outs, prone upon the parapet; and amongst the flaccid forms others yet alive, with ghastly wounds, shuddering, gibbering, slaving, groaning, whimpering for mercy, for food, for water. There, in a tiny unfinished shelter, cowered a youth with a shattered jaw, slobbering blood; here, in the bottom of the trench, lay another field-grey with one foot blown clean away—mud-stained, unshaven, filthy—sobbing in a sing-song voice, "*Ach, bitte! ach, bitte!*" and all around the shells screamed through the air or crashed with hideous reverberation and clouds of dust and stifling reek into the crumbling ground.

Our Ensign took his orderly and a couple of men and pushed along to the right into a bare and apparently unoccupied stretch of trench. He wanted to link up with the Guards attacking on their right, so as to form an unbroken front. The German barrage had begun, and the shells were

bursting freely about the newly captured position. Behind them they could see the supports swarming out across the ground over which they had just advanced. Our Ensign caught a glimpse of a gross German, fat and unwieldy, sprawling dead on the parapet, his face to the ground. Our young man found himself wondering fearfully if a shell would come and hideously dissipate that mass of flesh. With a shudder he hurried on.

They joined hands with the Guards on their right, and heard from the hot and grimy men a hurried tale of uncut wire and heavy losses. Our Ensign was told the story of the heroic death of a friend, an officer, who had adventured forth alone to cut the wire that barred their progress, and had met his death with his face to the enemy, the cutters in his hand. Then a man came up to our Ensign,—there was a German officer in a dug-out who demanded to speak to “th’ officer.”

Our Ensign followed the private, who led him back along the trench to a dug-out, at the entrance of which an officer stood facing a ring of Guardsmen. He was the old type of Prussian officer—none of your upstart, counter-jumper, pot-bellied, bespectacled, “I-surrender-and-let’s-call-it-a-draw” sort of special reservist, such as we have all met on the Somme, but a tall well-groomed figure, reticent and coldly hostile. He was wearing a Prussian military cap and a well-fitting grey overcoat. In his hand he held his shrapnel helmet. He introduced himself in good German fashion, with a little bow and click of heels, as a Lieutenant of the 240th Infantry Regiment. He came from the Rhine, where our Ensign had learnt his language.

“There are none but wounded men here with me,” he said in German, “and we shall make no further resistance.”

“You’d better not,” observed the British officer.

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"I myself am also wounded," the German went on, protruding his leg and showing his trouser ripped up to the thigh, which was wrapped in blood-stained bandages, "and I will give you my word of honour that there shall be no act of aggression on our part. Will you be good enough to see that there is no killing?"

He used the German expression "*Tot-machen*," infinitely grimmer, our Ensign thought, than the English equivalent.

"Nobody is going to touch you if you don't get up to any tricks," our Ensign answered. In exchange for the German's blunt expression he gave him a blunter. "*Nur keine Schweinerei Ihrerseits!*" were the words he used. A German best understands plain speaking. But our young man felt himself strangely moved at the spectacle of this Prussian, who walked surrounded by a halo in his own country, pleading so humbly for his life and that of his men's, with his besotted German conviction that

as they had done, so they would be done by.

Thus the pourparlers of surrender were conducted in a circle of big and gentle British soldiers. The conditions were that all the wounded who were able to walk should come out of the dug-out and be sent down to the rear under escort, and that the rest should remain where they were under guard until they could be removed by the stretcher-bearers. Our Ensign posted a couple of sentries at the dug-out with instructions to shoot anybody who tried to come out. He carefully explained these orders to the officer.

"You'd better go too," our Ensign added, "for this trench is going to be very unhealthy presently, and you'll be sorry you stayed!"

But the officer protested that he could not walk, so he stayed where he was under guard. He offered our Ensign his helmet, but our young man declined it.

"We're too busy to go collecting souvenirs!" he said, and went off to help his company commander get the men to work on the consolidation of the position.

Presently, while the shells spouted on in front of them in a steady stream, and German shells screamed back barraging all the slope behind, the advance went forward again, the supports coming up to hold the newly-won trench, and the attacking waves going forward to the next objective, a sunken road skirting the village. Here they found a rudimentary fire-position with several deep dug-outs and massively constructed shelters, into which they dropped a few bombs to make all safe within. But there was no living sign of the enemy.

A few hundred yards across to the right lay the centre of the village, a wild wreck of crumbling ruins, bathed in the mellow afternoon sunshine which gilded the smoke-clouds drifting in and out of the gaunt roofs. The din of battle raged unabated,

for in addition to the crash of the mighty projectiles exploding in the village, German shells burst noisily from time to time about their position on the road. But the shooting was poor. The enemy, deprived of the high ground and driven from the air, was shooting by the map and he was guessing badly.

It was very hot. The officers got the men strung out along the road until they were in touch with both flanks. The men lay down and wiped the sweat from their eyes and foreheads and drained their water-bottles, and chatted eagerly about their experiences of the day. Peter and our Ensign sat on a fallen tree-trunk and discussed the exact location of their next objective, a slope on the far side of the village, and debated the possibility of trouble in the forthcoming assault on the village, which was known to be very strongly fortified.

All this time the hamlet showed no sign

of life. Scan it as they would, their glasses showed them nothing more than the scatter of splintered roof-trees, the litter of red tiles, the torn white masonry of the houses,—of the enemy no trace. The next advance would take the Battalion right through the extreme left of the village—first through the orchards behind some houses lining a road leading into the main street; then across the road, through the houses on the other side and through more orchards to a sunken road, and across that to the slope beyond. Certainly the place had had an exemplary pounding from the artillery; but German machine-guns have a way of surviving the most ruthless artillery bombardment—especially in these villages of the Somme, which are honeycombed with old quarries and subterranean passages. It was quite on the cards, therefore, that the Battalion might be blown off the map before it reached its final objective.

But they did not bother their heads much

about that. The men were in the best of spirits. The old hands were delighted with the stout bearing of the young recruits, while the new-comers, if a trifle more sober, were well buoyed up by the excitement of the advance. The Company Sergeant-Major gave our Ensign a Gold Flake cigarette, and our Ensign offered in return his water-bottle, which had again been filled with the famous tea-and-brandy mixture.

It was time to move on again. The officers ran up and down the line getting the men up. They needed no encouragement: they were frantic to get on. So the line swept forward into the village.

They plunged into a tangle of long grass and shell-holes and broken stumps of gnarled apple-trees, and through a great farmyard surrounded by big barns and outhouses smashed and torn by the shells, showing lines of bunks and blankets tossed aside as though the place had been forsaken in a hurry. Somewhere on the right the loud

tack-tack of machine-guns resounded, and the swish of bullets brushed along their front. The officers checked the line a moment. On the right they saw a string of Guardsmen doubling into a house which spat fire from the first storey and basement windows. Abruptly the swish of bullets ceased, and the stream of figures tumbled out of the house again and followed in the wake of the advance.

In its day the village must have been a charming spot, its comfortable white houses with their red roofs embowered in ancient trees: in the spring, when the fruit-trees, clustering so thickly round every farmstead, were in blossom, it must have been rarely beautiful. Our Ensign had seen it in its prime, for on September 15 he had taken a compass-bearing on its yellow church tower, now battered to a blunt and crumbling stump by the British bombardment.

They pressed on through the tangle of ruins, clambering over palings and jumping

ditches like a party of boys out for a day in the country, past the ravaged houses and the broken trees, with the smell of singeing cloth and charred beams in their nostrils. They burst from the last orchard into the sunken road with a vision before their eyes of field-grey figures darting away across the fields. Then the men yelled their battle-cry and rifles rang out, and they all poured into the road and up the bank on the other side, and so out upon a wide grassy slope commanding a great green plain, where the British shells were bursting in a long, white, fleecy line.

Our Ensign looked at his watch. It was a quarter to three in the afternoon, and already the day was won. But he knew the hardest part was coming. Now they had to hold what they had gained.

Men are always inclined to rest on their laurels, to sit down in the final objective and light their fags and stretch their legs and talk over their experiences with their pals.

But Peter, radiating his satisfaction at their success, chased up and down the line, setting every man to dig the new trench.

They dug in on the fringe of a potato field. The men turned up potatoes by the score, and laid them carefully on one side, saying they would do for supper. The sun burnt down hotly upon them out of a clear blue sky as they dug and burrowed and scraped. The German shells screamed noisily over their heads, but none fell near the diggers. The British barrage still seethed and danced all over the plain in front of them.

That steady rain of shells was too much for the Huns, who had fled from the village to take refuge in shell-holes in the open. By twos or threes, and by larger packets, they kept bursting into view, running like men possessed, their hands above their heads, while the Guards, looking up from their digging, cheered derisively. Several parties thus broke cover and rushed hell-for-leather into the midst

of our Ensign's Battalion, where they meekly, almost gratefully, submitted to be searched, and were marched off at a good round pace to the rear through the raging German barrage.

But now the Germans seemed to have located the new line. Their guns shortened their range, and whizz-bangs and 5·9 shells began bursting about the digging Guardsmen. The officers went to and fro encouraging the men, sometimes lending a hand with pick or spade to give a good example. The shell fire was getting hotter every minute, and there was absolutely no cover save such as the shallow shell-holes afforded. There were casualties, and the cry of "Stretcher - bearER!" echoed up and down the line.

El Capitan sat on a corn-stook writing his report for the Commanding Officer; Peter was in conference with the Company Sergeant-Major. The men had buckled to

their work with a will and were digging feverishly, the sweat pouring down their faces. A British aeroplane soared, shrilly tooting, above their heads.

Lord, how hot it was! Our Ensign doffed his heavy helmet and wiped his brow. His rifle, which he had carried round with him all day, was planted, bayonet downwards, in the ground beside him. In a shell-hole, a few yards away, sat a brother officer whom he had not seen since the previous evening. The latter called out to him to come over and sit down. Our Ensign walked across and dropped on to the edge of the shell-hole, at the bottom of which a man was scraping with his entrenching tool.

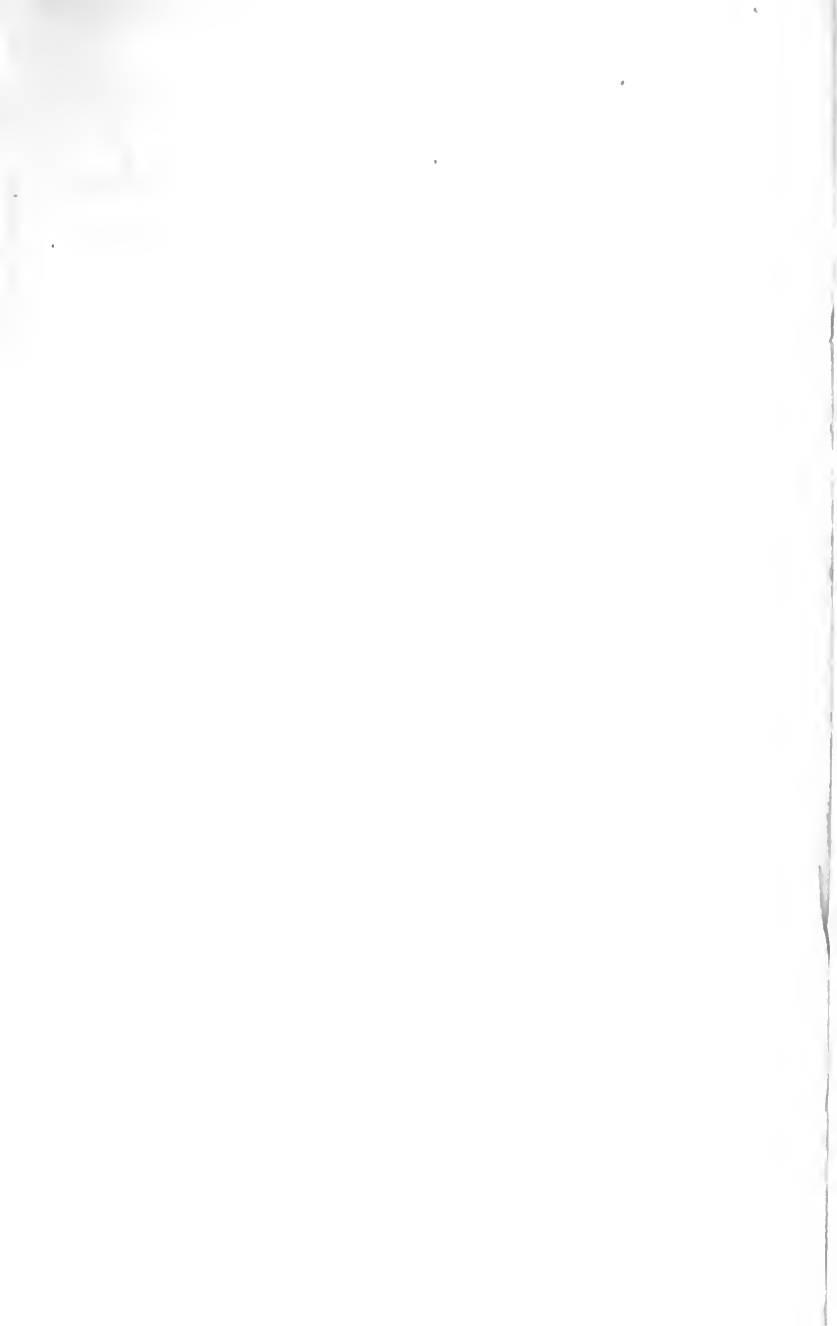
He filled his pipe and got out his match-box to light it. Then, from behind, something struck him a tremendous blow and lifted him high in the air with a mighty force, against which he struggled in vain

with mind and body, desperately fighting to remain on the ground, striving to retain the mastery over himself. . . .

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It was during his convalescence that this narrative came to be written.

THE END.



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